

bernice summerfield

NEW
WORLDS 

SECRET HISTORIES



edited by
mark clapham

BIG
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In a broken down church on an isolated planet, Bernice discovers more than she bargained for on her latest excavation.

An old crime is uncovered, and Bernice is asked to find out what she can about the culprits. The long-dead victims are surprisingly talkative, but they ask for something in return.

They want someone to tell them stories.

With an audience of the dead to entertain, Bernice tells them stories from her life and those of her friends, spanning the distant past to her recent present, from before civilisation to the depths of space.

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Mark Clapham

co-wrote the Bernice Summerfield play *Venus Mantrap* with Lance Parkin. He has also written for BBC Books' Doctor Who novels, as well as comic strips, articles and reviews for various publications and websites. This is his first short story collection as an editor.

He lives in Exeter with his wife and her cat.

Archaeologist by profession, adventurer by frequent happenstance, Bernice Summerfield has led - and continues to lead - an eventful life. Orphaned by a galactic war which tore through her home planet, the human colony world of Beta Caprisis, in the mid-26th century, she was sent to a military academy but bunked off permanently to pursue her dream of digging up old stuff for a living. Who cares if she forged a few of her qualifications along the way?

She's also travelled in time, had a son, lost a husband and saved the universe once or twice. This book tells tales of Bernice at various different points in her life and career - along with appearances from her son, Peter Summerfield, and Peter's father Adrian Wall, a member of the wolflike Killoran race and first-rate builder.



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A Game of Soldiers	11
Lance Parkin	
Cooker Island	37
Paul Farnsworth	
A Gallery of Pigeons	53
Jim Smith	
The Firing Squad	65
Eddie Robson	
You Shouldn't Have	87
Cody Schell	
The Illuminated Man	99
Mark Michalowski	
Redacted	117
Jonathan Dennis	
The Song of Old Man Bunyip	131
Richard Freeman	
Turn the Light On	¹ 53
Nick Wallace	
About the Authors	¹ 74
Secret Histories framing sequence	
Mark Clapham	

By the third night, Bernice was convinced that the storm couldn't possibly get any worse.

On the fourth night, it briefly rained blood.

'Cyclones out East pick up bloat swarms and suck them up into the upper atmosphere,' explained the landlord of the tavern in which she had rented a small room, a room where she faintly tried to sleep every night. 'Bloats are little more than sacks of blood anyway, blobby things that suck nutrients out of the water and through their thin skins. Whip 'em up, and they split open. Clouds drop the results on us a few clicks over.'

The landlord smiled, showing badly aligned teeth. He seemed pleased with this explanation, which had no doubt been taught to him in the village school several decades before, which he had learned by rote and was glad to at last have chance to pass on.

Bernice looked out from what the inn laughably considered its veranda, a rusty lean-to over a pitted concrete surface. Reddish liquid continued to run off the crumpled roof and into the mud, forming rusty puddles. Further away, the blunt cliffs that surrounded the village loomed oppressively in the fading light, the silhouette of a ruined tower just visible on the horizon. It looked like a broken, over-sized tombstone.

Bernice turned to the landlord and forced a tight smile.

'What a wonderfully interesting place you have here,' she enthused, one corner of her mouth twitching with the strain.

It was, without a doubt, one of the bleakest planets Bernice had ever visited. So blatant were its unsuitable qualities for human habitation that she was surprised that it didn't have an indicative name, like *Miserabilis* or *Depressus*. Instead, in a rather desperate bit of counter-marketing, the first settlers had named it *Jovellia*, a name suggesting humour, warmth and endless sunlight.

Later that night, Bernice pulled a pillow over her head, trying to block out the arrhythmic pittering of the blood-rain.

The next day Bernice awoke to find, as she had every day since her arrival, that the days were better than the nights. The rains continued throughout the day, but seemed lighter and more bearable. The thin daylight cut through the water, reflecting off the wet tiles of the village's small, slate

buildings. With the buildings bleached by the daylight, and the grey mountains looming ethereally behind them, it seemed almost beautiful. Bleakly beautiful, but it had a certain morbid attraction nonetheless. Crossing the village square, jumping between puddles and trying to keep her umbrella angled properly, it always seemed faintly picturesque.

Bernice's morning commute, such as it was, took her through the village, out into the woodlands which led up to the base of the mountain range, then through those woods to a semi-ruined church a couple of clicks away. It was desolate, but hard to get lost — the trees were numerous but spindly, providing little cover and allowing in plenty of light. Furthermore there was a rough but clear path all the way to the church. It was a pleasant enough hike, the foliage deadening the sound of the rain, and zig-zagged irrigation channels keeping the path largely dry.

The church itself was hard to miss, at least partially due to the bright purple tarpaulins stretched taut across the gaps in its rotten roof. Emergency tarps aside, it wasn't much of a looker, and it was hard to imagine the exterior conveying any sense of supernatural majesty: it was a wide box of a building, a blocky warehouse with only the symbols around the edge of its rooftop giving away its function. The walls were pitted grey stone, the windows thin and austere.

But inside... that was a different matter. Bernice had initially been reluctant to take the contract to work on Jovellia, as it was short notice, involved travel to a desolate outpost, and a possible delayed departure due to the impending rainy season. Worse than that, she had things she needed to be doing, matters unresolved since she had left the Braxiatel Collection that couldn't be neglected for much longer.

Then the agency rep who had sought her out showed her a couple of images of what she would, should she accept this short-term contract, be working on.

And with a glance, Bernice was hooked.

Reaching the church, she removed a keycard from her pocket, slid it into a padlock on the main door, then pressed her thumb against the side of the padlock for the secondary printscan. With a double beep the lock clicked open, and Bernice carefully unthreaded the length of chain that kept the church secure overnight. She suspected that this was a precaution

more against the storm blowing the doors open and flooding the place than any threat of burglary — the locals showed no interest in the church whatsoever, it had been derelict since the civil war and whatever religious practices still happened here, happened at home.

Bernice tossed the chain and lock on to a wooden table near the door, and fumbled about in the gloom for the small generator unit that provided temporary power for the site. She thumbed the power button, and with a wheezing putter it thrummed into life. The dark began to lift as the arc lights strung around the interior slowly came to life, and soon the heaters would begin to make the church vaguely habitable.

As the light levels rose, Bernice's eyes were already adjusting to the ambient gloom, and she took in the reason she had been sent here: the mosaics. Along one section of the wall, only slightly obscured by the scaffolding rigged up, the greying plaster had been almost entirely stripped away to reveal what had, until six months ago, been hidden: millions of brightly coloured stone tiles, forming elaborate, non-literal designs. The patterns swirled across the walls, lines flowing and looping around each other, richly contrasting with each other without ever clashing. Even in the relatively unflattering electric light, the effect was stunning, the shimmering contrasts playing with the viewer's sense of perspective, tricking the eye to suggest depth and movement.

In the peak of the church's use, lit by candles and seen through a haze of incense, they would have conveyed a glimpse into heaven. It was doubtless as close as the people on this world would ever get to witnessing the divine.

That was a few generations ago, now. In the half century before one of the planet's intermittent civil wars, an exceptionally austere regional regime had plastered over the lot. Fascists and fanatics rarely made the best art critics. After that, the church had been neglected, and if it hadn't been for a damp chunk of plaster falling away, and the design beneath catching the eye of a bored tourist sheltering from the rain, then they would doubtless have been forgotten forever. As it was, the tourist shared a picture of the mosaic on one of the more obscure travel channels, where it was picked up by the pattern-recognition software of a private museum that specialised in preserving, as they put it, Antique Faith Environments.

The museum called an agency, the agency found Bernice, and Bernice packed a bag.

Her task was to remove the plaster, preserve a record of the mosaics on site, and then blast the tiles with protective foam that seeped through tiles and wall alike, holding everything in place until a follow-up team came to slice the church up and bag the bits. Bernice's part in all this was the job of a few weeks, seemingly straightforward but fiddly and highly specialised. Her preservation work now would ensure that the walls could be reassembled correctly when they reached their new home.

It was a living, and it was at least proper archaeology, rather than treasure hunting, consulting or, worst of all, teaching.

Bernice picked up her toolkit and pulled herself up the scaffolding with her free hand. Removing a smaller torch from her pocket, she examined a section of plaster which she had injected with a solvent the previous night. Unlike the preservative foam Bernice would later apply to the tiles, which was designed to dissolve painlessly with application of the correct agent, the plaster was in danger of taking most of the tiles with it as it was removed. It had to be loosened and delicately teased away, inch by tiresome inch.

Bernice prodded the wall with her finger. It was, in scientific terminology, moderately squishy. A pressurised water jet and a rotational brush should do the trick. For this kind of work, two other items were needed - protective goggles and a nice cup of tea.

Bernice stood up, stretched, and before she could climb down again toppled backwards off the scaffolding.

It was a short drop, and Bernice was practiced enough in this kind of thing to *brace* herself for impact. To her surprise, she hit the wooden floorboards and they broke beneath her, barely slowing her fall. She dropped a short distance, hit a muddy incline, and rolled a few feet further before managing to spread her arms and bring herself to a halt. She lay on her back in the dark, breathing deeply.

Splintered, muddy but otherwise uninjured, Bernice was glad to find that she was still holding on to her torch. Unsure of exactly how precarious her position was, she stayed otherwise still while scanning her surroundings with the torch. By the looks of things her impact had broken through some

kind of trapdoor beneath the floorboards, a trapdoor leading to a sloping tunnel only a few feet high. The tunnel had been crudely bored, and clearly wasn't part of the original church design. This was a late addition, one that Bernice suspected was added for dubious purposes.

Bernice pulled herself to her knees, glad there hadn't been a well under the floor instead. She rubbed her back and pointed the torch downwards, to where the tunnel opened out into a small, cave-like area. She shuffled further downwards, until the space opened up sufficiently to allow her to stand up, albeit with only a foot or so clearance above her head. The man-made room she was in was bare, rounded at the corners, and about half the size of the church above. The walls, ceiling and floor were uneven, dug out of the rough earth with little ceremony.

Bernice let her torch pass over the floor, looking for anything of interest.

Her torch beam caught something pale, just ahead of her. She swept the beam of light back, and took a closer look.

It was a humanoid skull partially protruding from that earth.

Bernice stared at the skull. The skull stared back. There was a perfectly round hole in the centre of the forehead, the kind cleanly burned by a focussed energy weapon.

Bernice slowly raised the torch again, and swept it across the full expanse of the cave. The floor was very, very uneven, as if it had been dug up and filled in again and again.

Carefully, she backed out of the room and crawled back to the church.

'We have a problem,' said the man on the screen, static intermittently blurring his features.

'No kidding,' replied Bernice.

The man shook his head. No, you misunderstand. Another problem. There's a major stormfront moving across the Barrian Pass. It'll be a few days before we can reach you.'

'What?' Bernice sat back, balancing the shaky wooden chair on its back legs. She hovered thoughtfully like that, then dropped forward again, the chair's front legs clunking on the floor. She was not getting the fast response from the local authorities she had hoped for.

It was a few hours since she had made her discovery beneath the church floor. Part of her had wanted to just replace the boards and forget about what she had seen — it wasn't like bones were a particularly disturbing discovery for an archaeologist, or that it was unusual to have burials on holy ground. However, whether it was the starkness of that bore hole in the first skull she found, or the way the graves had been so carefully concealed, Bernice suspected that she wasn't looking at a normal grave. A brief geophysical scan of the ground confirmed her suspicions — there was more than one body here, and they had been hastily buried on top of each other in a crude grave.

They'd obviously been military, or at least some form of militia: while any uniform they might have been wearing didn't show up on her scan, articulated plates of protective armour were clearly visible. In one area there was the outline of what looked like a military standard field power-pack, but Bernice didn't want to disturb the evidence any further.

She had locked up the church, leaving all the lights on for once, and marched straight back to the tavern. The landlord seemed blissfully unconcerned by Bernice's early return, and she had locked herself in her room, booted up the basic comms unit in the room, and tried to get through to someone in authority.

That authority turned out to be quite far away. Jovellia was a small, sparsely populated planet and, though it was charmless, it was relatively free of major crime. The only homicide unit was based in the capital city, a good few hundred clicks away. After a number of attempts, Bernice had managed to get through to a detective and appraise him of the situation, the same detective who was now shrugging at her over the blurry connection.

'This is how it is, I'm afraid,' he said apologetically. He was middle aged, clean shaven and had an isolated tuft of hair sprouting at the front of his otherwise bald head. 'When the rain comes, only the waters shall move.'

Bernice had heard this bit of folk wisdom a few times since her arrival, and was in no mood to hear it again.

'OK, well what the hell do you want me to do until your guys can get here?' Her mind raced. 'I can cover the evidence easily enough, I suppose. They've been hidden away for a while, I'm sure another week or so won't —'

`No,' interrupted the detective whose name, as far as she could tell from a crackly introduction, was the disconcertingly pretty Detective Jasmyn. `There are certain local sensitivities regarding the civil conflicts in that region. This requires rapid investigation and resolution.'

`Well who could possibly —' Bernice stopped herself. 'Oh, you are kidding me.'

`I'm afraid not,' said Jasmyn. 'Under the Jovellian Criminal Statutes, I hearby deputise you, Professor Bernice Summerfield...'

Bernice stopped listening and started talking over him: 'No. No way. I'm an academic, not a policeman or a forensics expert. I'm in no way qualified to take part in anything like this.'

Jasmyn, having completed his legal blurb, smiled thinly. `I'm afraid you are as near to a crimescene specialist as we have, Professor Summerfield. Even if we could get a team to you today, we do not have the in-house skills to deal with this kind of situation, and would need to obtain them off-planet. Also, did you not perform a similar function after that dig on Tripelka? I believe your evidence was vital to obtaining a conviction on that occasion.'

Bernice rolled her eyes. How come bureaucrats could find any bit of information in the universe if they could use it against you, but never knew you existed otherwise?

`That was different, those bones were over three hundred years old, it was archaeology not forensics. I didn't even know at first that the Tripelkan worker class can live to be —'

Jasmyn cut her off. 'Semantics and details, Professor. You are the woman for this job. We do not expect you to interrogate anyone. Just uncover what you can, preserve and log the evidence. We will take over as soon as we can.'

Bernice squeezed her eyes closed, but the situation refused to go away.

`OK, OK.' She kept her eyes tight shut. 'I'll do it.'

`Very good,' replied Jasmyn. He proceeded to outline what he required, and spent a couple more minutes outlining the legal authorities Bernice would be working to. They squabble a little over liability, and eventually Bernice was content that she wasn't being too badly stitched up, all things considered.

'You are doing us a great service, Bernice,' said Jasmyn, before signing off. 'But be careful not to tell anyone around you of what you are doing. They could be relatives of the victims, maybe even the killers themselves. They may not speak of the wars much there, but the memories run deep.'

There was nothing for it but to get on with the job as best she could. After a hot, calming bath, and her long-delayed cup of tea, Bernice walked back to the church. Thankfully the advantage of working on a private job like the mosaic preservation was the high quality of equipment provided, and Bernice had enough kit with her to do what was being asked. She wasn't sure whether her sponsors would approve of their equipment being requisitioned by law enforcement, but if she could share the burden of her new job with the people who sent her to this hellhole in the first place, she was going to.

Very carefully, Bernice walked around the scaffolding, removing half a dozen of the lights and their power cables. She then shuffled down to what she had come to think of as the crypt, and set the lights up around the edge of the room.

The area prepared, Bernice got to work. The shock of the initial discovery aside, the practicalities of the work were the same as ever. Uncover, log, bag, tag. She started with the initial skull, marking out an area and slowly removing the dirt around it, taking soil samples for future analysis as she went. Every scrap and sample had its location carefully noted.

As the afternoon turned into evening, Bernice had uncovered most of the skull, and was ready to remove it from the ground. Her gloved hands began to very carefully lift it free, her finger sliding into the space as the skull came loose. Her forefinger touched something cold and flat, and she felt a little burst of static against her fingertip.

To her shame, Bernice dropped the skull. Shaking her head and cursing herself, she reached to pick it up again.

+It's dark.+

The voice came from nowhere. Bernice didn't even look around — she'd circled the psychic block enough times to recognise when a voice was telepathically projected straight into her mind.

'Who is this?' she asked, staying very still.

+I... I don't know. I can see you. I am before you.+

An image of Bernice crouched down, still and concerned, flicked into her own head with a migraine pinch. Her vision went swimmy, having temporarily been overridden.

`Fine fine, I get the idea,' she said, closing her eyes and pinching the top of her nose. 'I get the idea. Please don't hack images into my brain, it's impolite.'

She shook her head, and peered down at the skull. She could faintly see two tiny red lights in the eye sockets.

`Optical implants,' she muttered. 'I'm not a believer in ghosts. Now, I'm going to pick you up.'

+I feel nothing.+

There was a tone of despair in the non-voice she didn't like.

`No, you sense nothing, but I think you feel a lot,' said Bernice, carefully lifting the skull. 'I'm going to turn you around now.' She looked down at where her finger had been given a shock, and found roughly what she expected — a rusted circuit with a pure black stone at the centre, hanging loose from wires running into the skull.

`Hmmm,' said Bernice. 'As I thought, you were... connected.'

+Connected... yes.+

`Part of a telepathic network, connected by implants.'

+Yes, I can feel it now.+

The unvoice became more emotional.

+I can feel others, down in the ground. We feel, we all feel now.+

`Sorry,' said Bernice. 'That might be me. Travel like I do, and you pick up strange energy signatures like the local sniffles. One of those must have given you a nudge, woken you up.'

The skull wasn't listening to her.

+Alone, in the dark! You must dig them free!+

`Actually, that's what I'm here to —'

+Now! Or I detonate.+

Bernice paused. 'Detonate?'

+Weapons in the dark too. You dig, or I gouge the earth with fire and fury.+

Bernice tried to keep her thoughts and voice calm. 'Don't do that. You'll

bury yourselves, and me, forever, and then no-one will dig you free.' She let that statement settle in. 'Let me help. Let me dig up your friends.'

+Yes.+

Bernice had rolled the skull round in her hands, and its empty eyes were now staring back at her.

+Yes, thank you.+

The polite tone was at odds with the situation. Bernice wanted to ask the skull who he was, and who he had been, but she didn't want to trigger any memories that might cause another panic. First she needed to uncover more of the remains, and hopefully also whatever weapons were down there in the grave.

The silence seemed oppressive.

Bernice laughed when she realised that she found the quiet more unnerving than a dead man bellowing in her head.

+You know us?+

`Sorry?'

+You seem to know us. We do not know ourselves.+

'I don't know you, sorry,' said Bernice. 'I know what you are... but I don't know you.'

+What we are?+

'Yes,' she said, beginning to dig into the ground with more force than she had before. Sod the forensics, this required urgency. She wasn't sure the skull could deliver on its vague threats, but she didn't want to push her luck. She needed to keep he/it/them calm, find common ground.

'Yes,' she repeated. 'I've experienced something quite like this before.'



A Game of Soldiers

Lance Parkin

I

Bernice Summerfield woke to a message telling her that she had been drafted into the Danpetroan Army.

She'd heard the word 'Danpetroan' before. It took her about four woozy minutes before she remembered that she'd very recently spent time on a planet called Danpetro. She couldn't immediately recall leaving that planet, so a minute later she concluded she must still be on Danpetro. It was one of the agricultural colony planets, only a couple of light decades from Earth Centre. It was named after... something. She felt great delight at this early morning, deeply, deeply, deeply hungover display of deductive reasoning and encyclopaedic knowledge. Nevertheless, something nagged at her, something she had just heard and knew must be important.

The Danpetroan Army, she told herself, was most probably what the army on this planet called itself. That stood to reason, and wasn't the important thing nagging at her.

Benny lay in her cot. The lovely bright Danpetroan sun, which sustained and nourished eight harvests a year of the corn that grew over the many billions of acres of this rural paradise world, was shining right in her eyes, distracting her and making her sweary.

She was here on an archaeological survey, part of a five-man team who'd all arrived on separate grain freighters, taken one look around, met up in a local bar and realised they couldn't stand each other and there was virtually nothing here to survey anyway and what was the bloody point and at least the corn vodka was cheap and that they'd meet up in a month and pretend they'd surveyed the place and then sod off.

Fifty thousand years ago, a small population of nomadic snake people, officially designated as the Provisionally Pre-Extinct/Provisional-Ur-Danpetroan/Provisional Ophis Class IX-XI Demihumanoids, had roamed the plains with their oral culture, using tools made of soft wood, living in tents made of woven grass, eating raw small rodents and wild berries. It was like they were deliberately trying not to leave anything for the archaeologists. They'd all died out over a period of time for reasons that remained unknown but not necessarily in any way remotely interesting. The robot ploughs and harvesters of the human colonists would have long destroyed most of the evidence the snake people had ever existed, but Earthspace had strict laws about cataloguing and studying indigenous cultures. There was a practical element to this — the Colony Office didn't

want any descendants of the native people to return from the stars or emerge from hibernation chambers and stake a claim. It was always awkward and messy when that happened.

There had been a message. Benny remembered that now.

'Repeat message,' she told her alarm clock, and it did.

She told the alarm clock to tell whoever sent the message that they had the wrong number, and it did.

A new message arrived a minute later, telling her that if she checked Military Regulations General Order nine-nine-theta it would demonstrate that she was in the Army now.

And it did.

Benny swung herself out of her cot, stepped gingerly over numerous empty bottles of Infrabudget Yeah!, the cheapest local alcohol, and placed a video call.

The recruiting sergeant looked like everyone else on this planet, hearty and red-faced and a little over-fed. He was in a uniform, but wore it like he was at a fancy dress party. There was a fair amount of activity behind him, people in uniform running around a fairly ordinary office.

'Hey there,' he said, peering at the screen, which would be showing him her details. 'Private B.S. Summerfield. What can I do you for?'

'I just got drafted.'

'Yeah. I see that. Wouldn't worry about it.' Someone passed him a note, which he skimmed.

'Well, you know what? I am worried about it. I'm not even from this planet.'

He shrugged. 'It's a formality.'

'I don't care what you call it, just undraft me.'

He winced. 'OK... you're from Earth?'

'I'm not from Earth, I've never even been to —'

'Figure of speech.'

'I'll give you another figure of speech if you like. You have horses here, yes? You ride in on them?'

'You're Terran. A human being. You've been drafted under the Earthspace Defence of the Species Protocol.'

A display board started flashing behind the recruiting sergeant. Another soldier ran into shot, checking it.

'The what?'

'In certain circumstances, a planetary administration has the authority to draft any and all onworld human beings into the local defence force.'

Benny's head was still swimming around all this information.

'I'm not the only person to be drafted?'

He laughed. 'Private Summerfield, everyone between the age of 18 and 23 has been drafted. Thirty million people. The order came through this morning. You think we're this busy every day? Now, get down to the Army Recruiting Centre. Oh... you should bring a book, there's a queue.'

'Any idea why they're drafting everyone?' Benny asked, not for the first time.

The youngsters around her shrugged, then returned to their readers, data tablets, communicators, music players or conversations.

Benny had brought an archaeology textbook, an actual paper one. She was still young and naïve enough to think that it would make her look cool and interesting, and she held it cover-out in the hope it might act as a hunk magnet. The thick sunglasses were entirely practical, though.

'Have they done this before?' she asked.

More shrugging, but with a distinct vibe that no, this hadn't happened before.

Benny yawned. It was a lovely sunny day. She was far back in the queue. The recruiting office was a small brick building with only one door. There was a long, meandering line to that door. They were letting people in one at a time — the people leaving were drifting out of the same door, with a small plastic bag that simply wasn't big enough to hold a uniform and laser rifle.

This was very odd, Benny thought. She'd thought she was going to some vast hangar full of dropships and lines of identikit cadets. She had wondered, on the way over, if they'd shave her head before handing her a gun, or vice versa. Gun last, she'd decided. Haircut, uniform, assignment, combat, gun, combat, basic training.

There was a ripple of excitement passing along the line.

'What?' Benny asked.

A hefty girl to her right had an earpiece. 'News,' she said, as people gathered around her.

Benny suggested they might want more information than that.

'An enemy scoutship entered the atmosphere directly over the West Pole six hours ago.'

They weren't all that far from the North East Pole, so pretty well as far from that as it was possible to get without achieving escape velocity. The capital city, Quartz City, named because it was built on a mountain of solid quartz, the only quartz deposit on the entire planet, was in the West.

Benny felt a twinge of fear. There was a war on, but Danpetro was a light century from the Front. Or it had been. If the enemy had broken past all the fortresses and minefields of the Front, they would quickly get to the plump, undefended core worlds of Earthspace. Benny knew enough history to know that as soon as the walls fell, the city never survived very long.

'A scoutship,' she said aloud, 'a scout, so by definition not part of a main force.'

Others were looking it up on their various portable computers. Benny's data tablet was buried deep in her duvet, back in her dorm.

'Galkor class scout,' someone said.

`Are you sure?' Benny said, relaxing a little.

`They have an image,' another young man said, holding up an annotated display.

`Galkors have a crew of one,' Benny said, instantly wondering if 'one' counted as a crew. The people around her started checking that fact.

`She's right,' they started muttering, with a few variations, after a moment.

`They've mobilised thirty million people because of a one-man scoutship?'

Benny sighed. This is what happened when things like this were all automated. Some over-literal computer had panicked. It was probably some bargain basement AI that had been given the job of planetary defence because it wasn't up to monitoring the harvests. They'd all been drafted by a computer that couldn't outwit a cornfield.

`Does that mean we can all go home?' someone with an annoying, whiny voice asked petulantly. Benny realised it had been her.

An hour and a half later, Benny emerged from the recruiting building with a bag that contained laminated maps, a pocket survival kit, a wooly hat and a whistle. The headband was made from a silvery, reflective material with bright red letters on it: PLANETARY DEFENDER.

Benny had the distinct impression that this design hadn't been thought through. She couldn't see a way to make it easier to spot her than wear the hat—until she remembered the whistle they'd given her. The battleplan she inferred, then, was to dress in high visibility clothing, go to the designated area on the map and then stand there, unarmed, blowing a whistle.

`It might be a zen thing,' she suggested to herself. 'Or reverse psychology. Planetary defence as performance art?'

Back in the office, she had asked the recruiting sergeant (the same one from the videophone) who her commanding officer was.

`Me?' the Sergeant had shrugged.

Around a couple of corners, Benny broke away from the gentle stream of happy, laughing conscripts and found a spot of shade for herself under a tree. She sat down and decided to study the maps. They were old-fashioned printed and laminated charts, and were actually pretty good — Danpetro wasn't all that topographically complex but the maps marked ditches and potholes. They might actually come in useful for her archaeology, she thought, were she to bother doing any. The survival kit had all the usual basic survival kit things, and would make for a nice souvenir, one that might even come in useful on some future expedition. The whistle didn't even blow. At first Benny suspected that it was because it didn't have holes. After a minute or so, she decided that the problem was that it wasn't actually a whistle.

The mark of a good archaeologist was that they could find something like this and work out its purpose from tiny design clues and context. The

black cylinder was less than two inches long and made out of some tough, light metal. There were no seams or screws. It was weighted slightly at one end. It felt like it must be some sort of electronic device, but not one with any connectors or charging ports.

When I get round to sticking it on the back of my neck, she thought, it'll be fine.

This was an extremely odd thought to have, on reflection. But she understood now, somehow, that that's where the device fitted. What it did once it was there remained an ineffable mystery.

Benny put the not-whistle back in the plastic bag.

Benny headed back to her dorm.

The local agricultural college — on Danpetro, 'agricultural' was pretty much the only type of college — had generously loaned her a room. It was Third Harvest, so there were very few other students around, they were all away helping at the family farms. Benny was torn by this. On the one hand, she valued peace and privacy, on the other, on her way to the planet she'd had a mental image of a place where the broadchested young farmer types outnumbered the willowy, slightly awkward academic young offworlder women a hundred to one. This image had developed a little over time into a working model of a world where those young men would have no choice but to take off their plaid shirts, heft barrels around, wrestle and display many other rugged, physical qualities to impress an exotic creature such as her.

Benny had suspected this was perhaps a little too much to hope for, but she'd been looking forward to a few weeks at a university with all the entertainment and hedonism and none of the academic stuff. There weren't quite enough people here to lose herself in the crowd. Despite her best efforts, she'd made a couple of friends like Doqo and Leki and Gem. Drinking buddies, good company with an encyclopaedic knowledge of local breweries and happy hours.

Benny also hadn't decided quite how much work she was going to do. She wasn't going to do any field research, that would be crazy. Particularly as it would have to be done in an actual, literal field. There was a bare minimum she had to do to fulfil her grant requirements, but this was as meagre as the grant itself. She could get away with filling a few forms, and ticking a dozen boxes. Those forms would then be wired to some archive, probably never to be looked at again.

Benny had gradually worked out that the art would be in making it look like she'd worked hard, but without making any claims that were in any way exciting (and therefore anyone would want to check) or that might be seen as a challenge (and therefore anyone would want to check). There had to be a way, she'd concluded at the end of one particularly corn-vodka-evening, to get people to cite her work without reading it. After all, she'd never checked or even read any of the sources she'd cited in her own

work over the years. The trick was to support the orthodoxy. Some other academic would be talking about nomadic cultures, and he or she would bolster his own argument by invoking her: 'this phenomenon has also been observed by Arko on Troxos IV, Wilby on Kalkrav and Summerfield on Danpetro'. That kind of thing.

Now, suddenly, in a moment of utter clarity, Benny had worked out how to do it. The magic phrase that meant she wouldn't have to actually do anything, but could say plenty.

She found a spare data tablet and dictated a quick note:

'Most interesting of all, though, Summerfield found no *evidence* whatsoever of any gender difference in terms of either adornment or division of labour *between* males and females.'

It was, of course, true that she'd found no evidence of any of those things.

'It was possible the snake people worshipped a rain deity.'

It rained on Danpetro. So, yes, that they might have a rain deity was not physically or philosophically impossible.

Thisfascinating culture warrants further study.'

hmmmm. Overplaying her hand a little, there. Benny couldn't be bothered to delete it, thought about it for a moment, and added:

Although, of course, such studies could well overturn that finding.'

Benny read that back, then worked down the form, ticking the boxes, taking some — but not excessive — care to ensure the answers didn't contradict each other. Then she saved it as 'Final Report', tucked it away in the data tablet's memory, made a spare copy and then played chess with the data tablet for half an hour, losing nine times in a row, three of which in identical circumstances when she moved her Knight right in front of the computer's Bishop.

There was a knock on the door.

'Hey, Benny.'

This was Leki, the local girl who'd introduced Benny to corn vodka.

'You're looking smug,' she pointed out.

'Did a lot of work today,' Benny said. 'You?'

'I was drafted.'

Benny looked up. Leki was wearing her reflective hat. 'Yeah, me too.'

Leki had detected the wary note in Benny's voice. 'You OK?'

'I don't want anything to do with this war.'

'Who does?'

Benny thought about all those kids smiling and swinging their bags. They were a long way from the Front here. The war, for them, was something that happened on video screens and datafeeds. It was easy to fall for the romance of it, to see it as great space galleons rolling in on five-dimensional tides, meeting on the edge of solar systems, exchanging bloodless blows. See every sacrifice as some act of bravery, never see any bodies, let alone bits of bodies.

People here hadn't lost anyone.

Benny had worked that out on the first night here, over drinks. The war hadn't come up in conversation — telling in and of itself — and instead the students' gossip was peppered with references to their mothers and fathers, their grandparents. Everyone here seemed loaded up with siblings and cousins and aunts and so on. Every single one of these family members was alive and kicking, just there and available as a source of fresh, low-level anecdotes. Silly things they'd said, things they should have known they hadn't, some new and ridiculous hobby.

Benny's mind filled with a bright blue flash that had been seared into her memory when she was a child. The sight of a skeleton soaked in light, turning to look at her. The last she'd seen of her mother. Another memory, one of her father, waving goodbye. Benny remembered she'd been smiling and laughing. She had been too young to understand what was happening.

'The Galactic War is not a game,' Benny said, the words so trite and dilute that she hated herself for saying them.

For her part, Leki looked baffled to be told that.

'You've been to the Front?'

Benny had to admit she hadn't. 'Not the Front front,' she said. 'I've been caught up in the fighting a couple of times. I've been at training camps and staging posts. Seen refugee convoys.'

'It's the war,' Leki said. 'It's not going to end any time soon.'

Across Earthspace, the war was seen as something inevitable. A force of nature, like viruses before modern medicine or the climate before the invention of weather control. The soldiers on the Front saw that as a challenge, elsewhere most people now accepted that the war was just there and would be there for centuries yet.

'You're clearly not worried,' Benny noted.

Leki pointed at her silver hat. 'You try wearing one of these and acting serious.'

'If we're attacked...'

'If we were ever attacked, we're dead, Bernice. Look at me. Look at you. Not exactly built for combat, let alone trained for it.'

For centuries, now, mankind had spread out into the galaxy. There had been conflict, culture shock and all that stuff. On the whole, though, the explorers had found that most solar systems had been like Danpetro's — at

least one planet human beings could live on and grow food on that might have been inhabited once but which was empty now.

There had always been a Hawk faction, and they'd sat there for hundreds of years saying the human race should be building fortresses and space navies and planning for the worst. Everyone else had just laughed at them, seen them as paranoid relics of the olden days. A few of the first contacts had gone sour, but that was ages ago. Going forward peacefully and constructively was the right thing to do, the healthy thing, an essential stage of humanity's growing up. Besides it would cost way too much to support that sort of military.

Then it turned out that the Hawks had been right. The last fifty years or so had seen human exploration and colonization bump into the boundaries of galactic empires on all sides. Now, Earthspace was contained, it had boundaries. Go up into the night's sky, travel in any direction for long enough and you'd end up with some alien space cruiser coming alongside and hailing you and asking to see your papers. As a best case scenario.

So, that was how the Galactic Wars started. Earth had been at war with at least one of those neighbouring Empires for three generations, now. The Earth government would form an alliance with a couple of other space powers, they'd all team up to overthrow the enemy du jour, there would be five minutes of peace and then some member of the alliance would demand that Earth helped them defeat their enemy now — or that alliance member would just cut out the middleman and invade the nearest half dozen undefended human colonies themselves. And they'd be dragged into some other war. Rinse and repeat.

The entire spiral arm had been up to this sort of thing for tens of thousands of years, apparently. The human race was just late to the party.

'Anyway,' Benny said, 'I want to upload these, er, findings to the central records in Quartz City.'

'Good luck with that.'

'Um... thanks.'

'No, I mean good luck getting through. Haven't you heard? There's an outage on the data grid. All communications with Quartz City are down at the moment.'

Benny found that she hadn't replied to that.

'Is that something that often happens?' she asked, finally.

'We're not out in the sticks here, you know,' Leki objected.

You are, though, Benny thought, even as she was saying 'I know that, but even the most sophisticated system has the occasional breakdown.'

Leki wasn't fooled, but told her 'No, I don't remember it ever happening before.'

Benny had a sudden and overwhelming urge to book a flight right off Danpetro and be on that flight as soon as the maglev could deliver her

to the spaceport. Then she remembered that the only spaceport was in Quartz City.

Eleven, and there was still no communications link to Quartz City. Benny knew because she'd been trying roughly once every two minutes for the last two hours. Eventually, her data tablet had locked her out of the account, informing her that repeated requests like hers were hindering efforts to repair the link.

She'd left her room, found that there were small huddled groups everywhere in the corridors and plazas of the college buildings. As she passed, they all looked at her, anxious for news.

No one was scared, not as such, but there was an edge to things now. People didn't know what was going on. That was bad enough for most human beings, even someone like Benny, who was forever restless and had never settled anywhere for very long. It occurred to her it must hit hard if you'd been born and bred on a planet where everything followed predictable cycles of sowing and reaping, where most days you only met people you knew. They weren't completely carefree here, but they worried about known quantities. There wasn't ever very much uncertainty or challenge here.

'I don't know anything, sorry,' she said, more than once.

She had brought the bag with all her planetary defence stuff in it. Picking it up had been an automatic action, and she hadn't really noticed she had it in her hand until she was too far away from her dorm to bother taking it back. Benny had toyed with the idea of just dropping it into a bin, but suspected she'd get into trouble if she did that. Besides, just looking down and seeing the word 'DEFENDER' there gave her a nice, reassuring sense that things were being done, plans were in place. That comforting sense dissipated after about three seconds of actual thought about what those plans *were*, but Benny could solve that by not thinking too hard about it, and that suited her just fine at the moment.

She tried to be rational, to confine herself to what she knew for certain

The scout ship had crashed close to the West Pole, Quartz City was close to the West Pole. Communications had been lost with Quartz City.

I mean, Benny thought, it might be a coincidence. Or perhaps the crash has disrupted the communications grid.

Yes.

The sequence of events ran fluently through Benny's mind. The scoutship had crashed a little way from the city, but perhaps into a forest or a fuel dump. A fire had started, like a forest fire or a brushfire or something like that, and all the heat and flames and smoke had disrupted either power lines or a communications substation or two.

Benny was so proud of this theory that she immediately hurried over to the nearest group of college kids — Leki was one, she recognised a couple of others — and shared it.

They grinned at her, like she'd just given them the answers to tomorrow's test.

`It's got to be that,' one of the students said brightly.

`Benny's been all sorts of places, seen all sorts of things,' another - Jontil? Was that his name? — assured the group.

`You've seen forest fires?'

`Well... yes, I have actually,' said Benny. She had, on Balbastulon a year or so ago. A frequent occurrence there, and they had giant robotic tenders, humanoid ones, painted bright red and chrome like ancient fire trucks. Benny shared this with the group, basked in their admiration.

`Is that hail?' she asked.

There had been a skittering sound, something bouncing off nearby roof tiles.

`I don't think so,' Leki said.

Benny glanced up. It was a clear blue sky, not a cloud in it. Some sort of fuzziness there, she thought.

Something very small, fast and sharp skipped across the left lens of her sunglasses, nicking it.

`Damn,' Benny said.

Her right hand got stung.

`Ow!'

Jontil was clutching his face. The others were reacting to that. There was another round of skittering noise, like gravel being thrown.

`It's his eye,' Leki said, looking up at the sky, then immediately screaming, grabbing for her own face.

`Keep your heads down!' someone was shouting.

Now it was like someone was standing over Benny, flicking the back of her head and her neck.

She was instinctively heading for the cover of the big old tree in the middle of the plaza. The others, who'd never known anything worse than light rain, were standing around like lemons.

`It's a hailstorm,' Benny called out. 'Just get under this tree.'

They followed her, and the sky was getting dark. Taking their cue from that, the other groups of people here were hurrying inside, or under whatever canopies or other cover they could.

Everyone in that small group was safe under the tree now. One of the women was examining Leki. Benny could see blood, but the woman was whispering to Leki that it looked worse than it was, it was a cut right above the eye and it was pouring blood and that the blood was getting into the eye itself, drying up almost immediately.

Poor kid, Benny thought. She wasn't exactly taking it stoically.

She turned to see that Jontil was hunched up, back flat against the tree, pushing at his face.

`Are you OK?'

`Just a cut? Is that what she said?'

Benny bent down. 'Yeah, I'm sure you'll —'

Jontil's eye was caved in, leaking. Damaged beyond repair. Just looking at it made Benny's own eyes ache in sympathy.

'Your eye is very badly hurt,' Benny told Jontil calmly. 'I don't think it's bleeding, but just keep your hand over it.'

This was for everyone else's benefit as much as his. Benny didn't want them to see the mess.

'It feels like it's bleeding,' he said.

That, Benny said, is the goo from inside your eyeball. The aqueous humour, she thought, but didn't say it in case she'd got the name wrong.

'You'll need to get to a medical centre,' Benny said.

The hailstorm was picking up. Benny had seen worse, though, most people on most Earth-like planets would have been caught in something like this at some point, with hard little hailstones and the wind whipping them up until they became like shotgun pellets. This was a fairly light shower.

Two eye injuries was pretty bad luck, though.

'What is it?' someone was asking.

'Just hailstones,' Benny said.

'It's stones?'

Not actual stones. Hailstones. Little frozen blobs of water. Come on, even if you never get them here, you must have heard of them.'

'No.'

'They look like real stones.'

'Does it rain stones here?' Benny asked, only realising it wasn't a rhetorical question once it was out of her mouth.

'No.'

'Then it's not stones, is it?'

The hail was picking up a little, now, clattering and ricocheting from the branches of the tree they were under, pinging and dancing off the concrete of the plaza.

There were odd hailstones.

Benny took a couple of steps forward, fighting the urge to just look up to the sky. She reached out her hand, and immediately had it dashed by three or four razor sharp strikes.

'Ow! Bloody hell!'

She was sucking the back of her hand.

This wasn't hail.

There *were* stones.

Benny turned her hand palm up, reached out, winced as a couple of tiny pinpricks hit her. She'd closed her hand before whatever had hit her could bounce off.

Safely back all the way under the tree, and surrounded by the other kids, she opened up her hand.

'Stones,' one of the other women said. 'I told you they were stones.'

'What sort of stones fall from the sky?' Leki asked, perfectly reasonably. She'd calmed down a bit.

Benny's job, however informally she'd acquired the qualifications, however lackadaisically performed, was to identify things like this. She knew exactly what the stones were, and because she knew that she knew where they had to have come from.

The ground was shaking. At first, Benny had wondered if it was just her legs giving way, or just a side effect of the low rush of blood she could hear in her ears as her body caught up with her brain and started to panic. But no, this was an earthquake. It was dawning on the planet itself why it was raining stones.

Right at this moment Benny wanted to run away, very, very far from here. The only reason she hadn't was that she knew that if she tried, the hailstones would take her apart like submachinegun bullets. Despite that, she was still thinking about doing it anyway.

'These are pieces of quartz,' Benny told them.

'You've got your defence packs?'

The Sergeant was moving around the shelter, checking the answer for himself, rather than trusting the answers he was hearing. About half the kids had their Planetary Defender hats on now. They looked like they were camped out for a gig, presumably one headlined by the legendary indie band Planetary Defender.

This was a planet where silos held grain, not missiles. This shelter was literally a silo, one designed to be impervious to flooding and rodents. There were about a thousand people here, according to Benny's rough estimate. There were another nine shelters in the area, although the radio link between them wasn't working.

About two thirds of the people here were college age. Over half had some sort of injury requiring treatment — cuts, eye injuries, even a couple of severed tendons. It was as if someone had sprayed the entire town with a pellet gun.

Benny was sat with her back to a solid piece of machinery that remained resolutely offline despite the best efforts of a trio of electrical engineering students. It was meant to be some sort of emergency communications system.

The ground shook periodically. Earthquakes on a planet that, until this morning, had never recorded any significant seismic activity. The tremors set the heavy machine twanging, like it had been plucked. That, in turn, thrummed up and down Benny's spine.

'Summerfield, B.S,' the Sergeant said.

Benny smiled up at him.

'You have your neck guard?'

'My what?'

Rather than answer the question, the Sergeant pulled Benny's bag from her hand, rummaged through it for the small black thing she had thought was a whistle. He handed it to her. Looked disdainfully down at the bottle of corn vodka Benny had had to put down in order for him to do that.

'You know what you have to do?'

Benny nodded. All around her, the others were placing this 'neck guard' on the back of their heads, right at the base of their skulls. The electrical engineers were doing that right now.

She waited until the Sergeant moved away, then poked the device down the neck of her vodka bottle. There must have been holes in the little black thing after all, as a couple of bubbles of air rose up from it. The bottle twitched in her hand as the device fizzed. She poured herself another glass, and the device plopped out into it. It had warmed the vodka, a not entirely unpleasant effect, a bit like drinking saki.

The device was now completely inert. Benny sucked the vodka off it,

then — just to see — tried sticking it to the back of her neck. It had been perfectly smooth in her hand, but now adhered to her skin like Velcro. It must, she thought, have millions of little clawed capillaries that allowed it to cling to sheer surfaces, like the foot of a lizard.

The Sergeant passed back her way, nodded his approval. He was wearing a device, too. Just about everyone who'd been issued with one was, now.

The electrical engineers had gone very quiet, but their workrate had dramatically increased. Now one opened an inspection panel, another jiggled around some module or other in there, another flicked a few switches. All very co-ordinated. All for one and one for all.

As none of them had asked Benny to move, she didn't care what they did.

She sipped some more vodka. It was nice. There wasn't a huge amount of it left, and that was odd, because Benny thought it had been a full bottle an hour ago, when she'd come down here. A mysterious mystery, she thought, a mysterious mystery indeed and once her head stopped swimming around, she pledged to solve it. She sipped some more vodka.

Everyone, she now noticed was a lot more calm all of a sudden. Everyone but her — she was bricking it. All the others, though, were moving around, performing their assigned duties. Leki looked quite fetching in her eyepatch, Benny thought, but the young woman was moving around with what could only be described as a military bearing. All very upright and controlled, as if every single thing was of the utmost seriousness and importance.

The planet was under attack, and that would have a sobering effect on most people, Benny knew that, even if her response was to contrive to make herself diametrically opposed to sober. But the way Leki was behaving was more than that. The young woman was, suddenly, a soldier. Those engineering students were suddenly acting like an Engineering Corps. Even the Sergeant was going around with the authority and confidence of an actual Sergeant, rather than just dressing like one. A step change from this morning.

It was those 'neck guards'. Benny understood that, now. They were some kind of portable instant teaching machine, they had to be. Such machines existed, but they were pretty cumbersome pieces of kit, the size of a wardrobe. Fashions in education came and went, and the current thinking was that teaching machines had their place, but too many limits to be all that useful. Use one, and you'd end up knowing the names of the Roman Emperors, the British Monarchs, the elements in the Periodic table, the Hyperion-Blackadder equations governing hyperspace navigation and so on, but it wouldn't help you apply that knowledge. You'd get a list of facts in your brain, no way to apply them.

She'd heard it said that knowledge you acquired via a teaching machine was a solid block, something you could recite, but not actually break up to think about. If that was right — and not just someone moaning about kids

today and the technological shortcuts they were taking instead of doing things properly blah blah — then they weren't suddenly trained soldiers, they were just following some program or other.

Quite an efficient way to give a planet an army if it needed one in a hurry. That said, Benny was extremely glad she had disabled her own 'neck guard'.

The name was a pun, she realised. Presumably that was intentional.

They even had the swagger.

Benny's father had been in the military, she'd been drafted into a military academy and, as she'd told Leki, she'd spent time near the Front. She knew how soldiers behaved and they all had a macho thing going on. Especially the women. Now, you could call it bravado or you could call it bravery. Were they just copying the soldiers they'd seen in the vids? When they said 'lock and load' and 'saddle up, people' or any of those expressions were they just quoting? Was it fair to call it 'acting like a soldier' when the person doing it was a genuine, 100%, got a paycheck every month from the Army, bona fide actual soldier? Benny's answer to those questions depended on her mood and the company and the tally of alcoholic units consumed.

What never changed was that students didn't act like soldiers. Even students who had served quickly reverted to Student Mode when semester started.

The college kids were all sat there, attentive, alert, ready to lock and load and move these people out and saddle up and give 'em hell.

Benny knew enough to blend in, play the part.

'Satellite Grid online, sir!' someone shouted from just above her.

She still had her back to that communications unit. Now it was beginning to warm up.

The Sergeant and a group of other officers began to congregate around it. Benny decided to get onto her feet and take a gander.

The communications system had a standard-sized hologlobe the size of a beach ball mounted on it. That was now rezzing up, although the image was still far too voxellated to interpret. It was twisting around like a pretzel, strands of blue and gold and silver and black.

'What am I looking at, Private?' the Sergeant asked.

'Patching into the Satellite Defence network, sir!'

'Looks like the image has been corrupted, sir!'

'It can't be hacked,' the Sergeant insisted. 'It's absolutely impossible.'

'That's the overview,' Benny said quietly. 'It's set for a 2D screen at the moment. You need to reconfigure.'

The Sergeant turned to glare at her, but Benny knew she was right. A minute or so later, the engineers admitted it, and flicked the switch they needed to.

It took about a minute for the hologlobe to resolve into an image, another five or six before people could interpret what they were looking

at, and far, far longer for anyone, Benny included, to accept it.

`Enemy propaganda,' the Sergeant said. 'They've hacked into the grid.'

`A minute ago you said that was absolutely impossible,' Benny pointed out.

`It's... that's absolutely impossible,' he said, pointing at the screen.

He was treating her differently. He must realise that her neck guard wasn't working.

`OK... can we all agree what we're seeing?' Benny said, quickly adding, 'whether it's really there or whether it's some trick?'

It was — by common consensus — a vast machine. The real-time video images showed that it was a structure the size of a large town, and that it was assembling itself with a variety of antigrav beams and other forcefields.

Benny had never seen anything like it before, but could work out that the uppermost part was a small fabricator plant, presumably brought here by the alien scoutship. Fabricators were still pretty rare in Earthspace, but the technology wasn't all that exotic these days. They automatically took raw materials and processed them into finished items.

`Life forms?' the Sergeant asked.

He was asking how many of the enemy were operating that device, but he'd phrased the question too broadly and his little mind-controlled buddies just went for a general sweep of lifeforms in that picture — the whole Western hemisphere of the planet.

`One,' the report came through.

The sick feeling in Benny's stomach developed a distinct sick feeling of its own.

`There were millions of people there,' one of the soldiers said. 'Where are they?'

Someone else took him aside to explain.

The other soldiers were beginning to huddle in small groups. Were they comforting each other? Giving each other pep talks? Benny had no idea.

`What's that machine for?' she asked. She could think of dozens of possible explanations.

The engineers operating the hologlobe starting playing around with the angles and requesting annotations and overlays from the various tactical computers. Benny idly wondered where the pictures were coming from. The enemy could have taken out the satellite grid, and it would be standard tactics to do that, but it was always tricky to get ever satellite. There were probably climate monitoring stations further into space or on some convenient moon.

`It's drilling to the West Pole,' the Sergeant announced. The animation the computer had come up with bore this out. Benny snickered to herself at her brilliant, if inadvertent, play on words.

`Well, it's something to do, I suppose,' she said.

The Sergeant had just left, and was halfway along the silo calling people

over. One person from each of the huddled groups now joined him. It looked like they were designated group leaders. Benny couldn't make out what was being said.

Benny's attention returned to the hologlobe. The drilling device was pretty crude. Fabricators weren't all that good at very complicated or precise mechanisms. This was a very straightforward mass driver, by the look of it. It funneled up rock from the surface of the planet, stripped out the radioactives to fuel the forcefields, then used the forcefields to compress what was left and then fire it at the planet at hypersonic speeds.

It was showing off, really: if you wanted to do all this, why not just find a big enough asteroid, stick an ion drive on the back and point it at the planet? The point was that humans could do that, but they couldn't do this. There was a message here, and one presumably intended for someone coming by the shattered remains of Danpetro in a week or two, rather than the people who were currently left on the planet. The message was that the human race was facing an enemy that could do things they couldn't even have dreamt of.

The Sergeant was now taking up position on an impromptu dais, just a raised area of floor. The group leaders surrounded him, now, like a praetorian guard.

'This cannot be allowed to stand,' the Sergeant said. 'The enemy has attacked us, we must counterattack, and swiftly. This is an outrage, a war crime, and it demands a military response.'

The praetorian guard were all wearing their Planetary Defender headbands. Not even they had been issued with guns.

'They're serious?'

This was an older man, possibly one of the tutors at the agricultural college.

'Looks that way,' Benny said. 'I have to admit, I can't see a plan in their flaw.'

He offered her a hip flask. Whatever was in it was a great deal stronger and more bitter than the corn vodka. Benny quite liked it, but she wasn't up for a second swig.

'You're wearing one of those... things.'

'Yes. It's broken.'

Benny was fascinated by the 'soldiers' and was watching them in minute detail. If they'd been paying the slightest attention to her, they'd probably bring her in for questioning as an enemy spy. Everyone wearing a neck guard — herself excepted, obviously — was now lined up in ranks, listening to a series of technical briefings around the hologlobe.

They must have known her device wasn't working, but no one had said or done anything. She'd had visions of them holding her down and pinning one in place.

The students didn't seem brainwashed or zombie-like or what have you. Benny had been struggling for the right word, and had finally found it nestled in the part of her brain reserved for the words she had little use for in her day-to-day life. The students were 'acting professionally'. Moving around quietly and efficiently, only talking to exchange important information relevant to the task at hand, behaving courteously to their colleagues.

It wasn't natural.

She turned to older man and introduced herself.

He was Professor Iradius Flynnnt.

'Professor of Applied Getting the Cruk Out of Here?' Benny asked hopefully.

'Agronomy,' he replied, sadly. 'You?'

'Archaeology.'

'Ah.'

'Yeah. We're screwed.'

He laughed. 'Could I have my flask back, Professor Summerfield?'

Benny thought about that for a moment, then decided it would be rude to tell him 'no'. She surrendered it.

The soldiers had weapons now. Six weapons. Four handguns, a rocket launcher type of thing and a box of small grenades. They'd found them in a back cupboard.

The ground rumbled again. It had been doing so every few minutes. Benny had no way of estimating where they were on the Richter Scale.

'The problem,' Benny said, 'is that there aren't any spacecraft anywhere on this planet.'

'Hmmm,' Professor Flynnnt said.

'Hmmm indeed.'

'It strikes me,' he said, 'that there is *one* spaceship.'

It took a moment for Benny to work out what he meant. 'The scoutship? The enemy scoutship?'

Instinctively, Benny felt there ought to be a better plan than that. Flynnnt's suggestion demonstrated thinking, at least, with a charming lateral quality.

The ground was shaking again.

'That's getting worse, isn't it?' Benny shouted over to the team manning the hologlobe.

They agreed with her, were already running new scans and analysis.

Around then, the ceiling started to crack and rain down on the people in the silo. The power failed mere moments before the first deaths.

Benny clawed her way through another yard or so of rubble. She grabbed someone's hand in front of her. Professor Flynnnt, behind her, already had hold of the other one. The three of them — and perhaps others, Benny

couldn't tell — eased and tugged and shifted around until they were all down in the sub basement.

Benny's grasp of the geography was good enough. They were below the ruins of the silo, five levels below the ground. There were about a hundred people here. Others would have escaped through similar ducts and pipelines. Many wouldn't have escaped.

The lighting was working here, although it was a pallid, chemical blue lighting. Benny looked down at her hand. Even dirty, her skin looked like it belonged on a dead body.

The ground was shaking again.

'What do you think is happening?' Benny asked, not expecting a definitive answer.

The next tremor almost knocked them off their feet.

'There's something close,' Benny said. This wasn't the rumble from some distant event, this felt more like the epicentre.

And then, for the second time that day, possibly even the third, the sky started falling.

Great cracks appeared in the ceiling, veins of golden sunlight. The service tunnel they were in was cast from concrete — or something very like it — but now the solid mass just frayed and slipped apart.

Benny's arm was up over her face, covering her eyes.

The alien scoutship was hovering there, a mirror for the blinding sunlight. It was a flattened disc, the size of a small house. Human antigrays made the air blurry or made it look like there was a crude blue line around everything. This just sat in the air like there wasn't any problem with that.

The scoutship was several hundred yards away. They could see now that the ground directly beneath it was parting, as if all that rock and mud was smoke. A perfectly hole — shaft, Benny supposed the correct term was - formed as she watched. It was exactly as wide as the scoutship, and only getting deeper.

'Run!' Benny said.

The first blasts started seconds after she'd said it. You don't get to displace that much material without consequences, and those came in the forms of great pressure waves, tremors in the earth, just simple moments where the air and ground by them rippled.

All the survivors were running. Benny could see a second group from the silo, then a third. The soldiers among them stood their ground for a moment, but the ground was just vanishing around them. People were dying again, torn apart.

The soldiers were charging and Benny was charging right alongside them. She hoped Flynnt was behind her, but she couldn't spare the energy to check.

Screaming.

The retreat was turning into a rout, was turning into a massacre.

The enemy scoutship hadn't fired a shot. There was no sign that its occupant had even noticed the scores of human beings bubbling from their hiding places and running for cover.

The blast effect gradually diminished. At a quarter of a mile distance, it was little more than a buzz in Benny's ears. Thirty seconds' running later and even that had gone.

Benny found a foxhole, formerly a small college outbuilding, and around a dozen or so people got behind the ruined wall. Flynnnt was there.

At this distance, in these circumstances, they were safe.

The air was full of sound — shouting, barked orders, the sound of trees and walls toppling, an odd whipping noise like the flap of a sail that Benny realised was the air rippling.

There were only dozens of people alive now from the thousands who had been in the silo. They quickly established there were four foxholes, at least within earshot. The one to their left had that Sergeant in it. One of his praetorians was shouting out the names of the others in there. Then the call came out from their right.

Benny knew she'd only survived through the sheer luck of not being in the wrong place, or able to stumble behind cover.

None of her drinking buddies were here with her. Flynnnt was, one of the former hologlobe technicians was. He was at the edge of the fallen wall, coiled and alert, scanning the lip of the crater and the flying saucer that had dug it. He had one of the handguns. Of the eleven people in the crater, eight were Planetary Defenders, proudly wearing their woolly hats.

'We have the ZP9 here,' the Sergeant called out. Benny had quite a good view of him and most of his group from her vantage point.

'The?' Benny asked quietly, but the Defenders with her were too busy hanging on every word the Sergeant was saying to respond.

She looked over to Flynnnt, who shrugged.

'ZP9?' she repeated. She was whispering, although if anyone had asked she'd have been hard pressed to explain why.

'I will deploy the ZP9,' the Sergeant said. 'If required, all units should support me with covering fire.'

The rocket launcher, Benny realised.

A flash from the next foxhole, a reassuringly masculine whooshing noise.

The rocket arced up towards the alien ship, half a mile away. Before it was a third of the way to its target, a bright white beam of light fired from the saucer.

Benny saw it all. The air was scored by the beam like God had used a Stanley knife on it. A perfectly straight, perfectly white, pencil-thin shaft of light. It was just there, right under the arc of the missile.

It missed, Benny thought, her mouth loosening a little to start to form the words as the white light hit the foxhole where the Sergeant was. The

Sergeant was no longer there. The beam now squiggled along the ground, swerving and kinking into every single individual there, evaporating them.

Now it swept from the Sergeant's foxhole to hers, bisecting a wall, a tree and another wall to get here. The beam touched the hologlobe technician, danced from person to person, taking them apart as it glanced against them.

'It missed,' Benny said, unable to stop the words she'd been planning to say, all of a split second ago.

The beam was already in the next foxhole but one.

She was alive, Flynn was alive, an elderly woman was alive. The others had gone.

'The ones who were wearing the hats,' Benny realised. The Planetary Defender hats. 'It was targeting —'

There may still be time.

She stood, shouted at the top of her voice. 'Take off those hats, take off those stupid hats.'

The white light had already shut off. The last thing it did was flick across to touch the rocket the Sergeant had fired. That rocket had got about two-thirds of the way to its target when the ray destroyed it.

'Now what?' Flynn was asking.

There was a rendezvous point by the college gates. Benny and nine other survivors made their way there.

This was a car park, and Benny knew that because the cars were still parked here. In front of her, cars sat in their designated places, many in the pleasant shade offered by a large, friendly tree. There was damage - chipped glass from the gravel storm at the start of all this, fallen branches. It all looked perfectly normal. Behind them, a flying saucer was warping space to tunnel to the planet's core.

Before long, other survivors arrived at the rendezvous point. Virtually all of them soldiers. They were all still wearing their hats. The small groups of men and women marched as if this was a parade ground. Once in position, they stood to attention, unfazed by anything that had happened.

There were a couple of surviving hologlobes. They were telling them that the machine over the ruins of Quartz City was drawing power from the magnetic pole. The planet itself was not going to be destroyed, just sucked of magnetic energy.

They weren't sure what the scoutship was doing, but the best guess was that it was laying the foundations for giant buildings. The shaft being dug here was for geothermal energy, probably. Whether those buildings would be factories, gun emplacements, living units or whole functioning cities there was no way of knowing.

Now everyone in the area had congregated here, it was obvious there were still many hundreds of survivors from the people who had been on

campus. Thousands, probably. Beyond the immediate area, things were unscathed. Four praetorians now took command, promoted other soldiers to officer rank. Then everyone stood around for a few minutes, looking distracted.

`OK...' Benny said.

`It looks like these soldiers are receiving instructions,' Flynn said. He wasn't in a good way. He'd survive, but he was an old, overweight man. He wasn't used to the exercise. Benny was barely in her twenties and was on the brink of exhaustion.

`Instructions...' Benny repeated, a little blankly.

`From the neck guards.'

`Yes, of course.' She checked the back of her neck and discovered that hers had fallen off at some point.

The praetorians were describing the plan. The plan was to launch a frontal assault on the scoutship, overwhelm the defences, get underneath it.

Benny knew enough about Earth history to know that this plan had been tried a number of times in the past, but had stopped being an effective strategy around the time someone had first tied a flint to the end of a long stick.

She stood, hurried over to the praetorians.

`No,' she said. 'You can't do this.'

One of them, a man younger and shorter than Benny, turned to face her. 'It's all part of the strategy,' he said calmly.

`Don't you understand?' she said, getting really close. 'Don't you realise that you're only saying that because of... this — !'

She grabbed at the boy's neck guard. It didn't come off. Her fingers scrabbled at it, but it was embedded there. She might as well have been trying to pluck off his nose.

`It's these neck guards. They're... they're crap. They're some bargain basement solution to a completely different problem. If you had weapons, you might stand some sort of chance.'

The boy reached for her wrists, firmly pulled her off him. Held her there, looked up at her with a determination that would have impressed Benny if she hadn't known it had just been cut and pasted there.

`The neck guards contain every known attack pattern. This is the best one, in the circumstances.'

`The best strategy is...' Benny faltered.

`The plan of action is in place, it will be implemented.'

`Look_ I don't know what to do. Something needs to be done. No arguments there. But I don't know what, and neither do these neck guards. There's no military strategy that'll work. Not that you can do with some wool hats and less than a handful of guns. We need to think of something else. Send a distress signal, then hide somewhere until a battlecruiser or two shows up. There may already be ships on the way.'

`It is a one man scoutship, we outnumber the enemy seven hundred to one.

`How do I get it into your thick skull...?' Benny began.

She thought about it.

`That's not the problem, is it? Your skull's not the problem. How do I get it into that neck guard? That's the question.'

`All command and control functions are routed through the telepathic servers,' the praetorian said calmly.

Benny looked up at him. 'They are? Where's that?'

`The recruiting office,' he replied.

That wasn't all that far from here. And the plan Benny had now was better than the one she'd just heard.

The streets were completely deserted. There was a light dusting of quartz, then drifts of sand and mud, presumably debris from the drilling operation.

The enemy ship was fixed in the air behind Benny. She had vowed not to look back. She broke that vow three or four times a minute.

The recruiting office sat there, completely unscathed.

The door was locked. Benny found a chunk of brick in the gutter and unlocked the door with it.

The power was still on in the small office. It looked like everyone had gone on lunch break.

She quickly found the telepathic server, a black dome about the size of a human head. It was inside the stationery cupboard. It was plugged into a data tablet. There was no power cord or obvious on/off switch. Benny toyed with the idea of smashing it open with the chunk of brick. That might damage the people under the influence of the neck guards, she decided.

Benny disconnected the data tablet that had been here, swapping it with her own.

The tablet's display flipped over and gave her a tactical overview of the surroundings, along with spidery lines with lots of arrows that was presumably the plan of attack. Certainly the lines all converged on the little silver circle in the middle of the screen, which she took to be a representation of the enemy ship.

There was the sound of gunfire outside. Handguns, Benny guessed, before remembering that she had a battle computer sat in her lap. Peering down, she could see the five gunmen, all in different city locations. A moment later, the gunfire had stopped, the display had updated to delete the gunmen and revised upwards the estimates of the enemy firepower.

It wasn't too late.

The menu was a heady mix of very complicated controls to implement a very small number of commands. Run, Jump, Hide, Charge... and only about ten others. All menu-driven. Benny now carefully selected the units

in turn, starting with those nearest the scoutship.

Select All. Drop. Hats.

Select All. Run. To. Rendezvous Nine.

Rendezvous Nine was ten miles away, according to Benny's laminated maps. There were going to be some sore legs in the morning.

Shout: 'Follow these guys. They'll take you to safety. Don't run if you can't manage that. OK?'

Something there for the civilians.

Repeat.

OK... they'd keep doing until they reached Rendezvous Nine.

Benny went back outside. She'd stay here, with the server, until everyone else was at Rendezvous Nine. The scoutship hadn't moved, hadn't reacted to the humans retreating. It was quite beautiful, in its way. A polished metal disc, one that reflected the ground beneath it and the sky above it.

Benny needed a drink. There was a big shop just a few doors down that sold corn vodka to students by the crate. It was normally very cheap, today it was going to be even cheaper.

Free alcohol, Benny thought, was a political slogan she could get behind.

It was a week before the Task Force arrived. The scoutship had moved across the planet in that time, digging its shafts. The survivors had stayed out of its way.

It had been a tense time, obviously. While the scoutship made no move to attack them, that could have changed at any moment.

When they finally showed up, Earth Central had taken no chances. A battleship, a carrier and three cruisers, with all the support vessels. They popped the scoutship like a bubble with their first shot, while they were still out past Danpetro's moons.

Benny would love to be able to say that she spent the week in a series of morale-improving, practical activities. She didn't leave the shop that sold corn vodka. She'd been joined there by a couple of people, including Flynnnt and Leki.

She couldn't remember that week at all, which was exactly how she wanted it.



By the time she had finished her story, Bernice had unearthed a second skull. This one hadn't spoken, but she could feel a second intelligence poking at the edge of hers.

'Hello you,' she said, placing the second skull next to the first.

+Hello.+

The not-voice of the second skull was identical to the first. As she suspected, these weren't the personalities of the men, they were something else, something less differentiated.

+We are like the network of soldiers?+

Bernice made a non-committal hum. 'Not quite. I don't think you're the soldiers. I think you're the technology that linked them.'

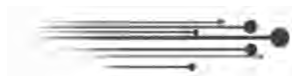
+But those were machines+

The two identical voices were slightly out of sync.

'I know, but this is different technology to what I remember, and the side effects might be even stranger, might have brought you to...' She trailed off, looking at the two skulls. 'Well... to life.' It sounded stupid as she said it, these things being alive when they were already mouldy bones.

+Life?+

'Well, yes. You'd be surprised where life can emerge.'



Cooker Island

Paul Farnsworth

A nerve-shredding howl was the last thing that Bernice wanted to hear. On a planet where no one ever goes, on an island that no one is likely to find, in a place that was supposed to be inhabited by only a few harmless herbivorous rodents, it was supremely disconcerting to be roused in the small hours by a blood-bubbling wail that seemed more than equal to the task of scaring the doings out of a few nuts and berries.

She sat up and swung her legs off the edge of the bunk as it sounded again, and was acutely sensitive to the slenderness of the aluminium walls that separated her from the darkness outside. This fragile trailer couldn't hope to stand up to a noise like that, and for the first time in the three days since she had been here, she was grateful that she shared it with Laura.

Not that Laura was in any state to provide moral support. Like all students, she rarely ever allowed anything to divert her from the serious business of sleeping. Her only gesture of solidarity in this moment of crisis was to roll over and mutter something indistinct on the subject of cheese.

Bernice pressed her cheek against the foggy plastic window and peeked out across the moonlight-dappled clearing, to where the silhouettes of the nearest trees stood green-black against a purple-black sky. Nobody had mentioned anything about mysterious nocturnal noises when she had volunteered to join Professor Eastlight's dig. She hadn't been prepared for this sort of nonsense. More importantly, she hadn't been insured for it.

There were no signs of activity from the boys' trailer. Perhaps they hadn't heard it? Perhaps she hadn't heard it? She toyed with the possibility of the noise being imaginary, but it crashed through her flimsy fantasy once again — louder, closer and unmistakably real. Ignoring it was unlikely to make it go away. She dressed quickly and slipped outside.

The air was cold enough to muffle sensation. A light breeze playfully ruffled the tops of the trees, making them whisper and creak. Light was now spilling from the open door of the other trailer. Richard, Professor Eastlight's son, was already walking towards her. Behind him, bounding along like an excited puppy, was the posh boy.

'You heard it?' Richard asked, his voice softly breaking on the night air.

'Just a bit,' Bernice replied in a whisper.

'Sounds pretty angry,' the posh boy said. His name was Gavin, but Bernice couldn't get 'the posh boy' out of her head. That's how Laura had first introduced him. Bernice didn't know whether he was genuinely as privileged as the epithet implied, but she had never been able to shake the

impression that archaeology was, to him, more of an idle pursuit than a career.

'I thought I saw... Maybe... Something in the darkness...' Bernice faced the dark woodland and strained to see beyond the dancing patterns on her retinas, an ear cocked to the softest brush of noise.

'I think I should wake the Professor,' Gavin decided.

'Off you trot then,' mumbled Richard, the disdain in his voice only just sneaking in above the threshold of acceptable social behaviour.

Gavin started to go, but stopped dead when they observed an unmistakable shudder in the undergrowth.

'There!' shouted Richard.

'I saw!' Bernice responded. Startled, the mysterious nocturnal interloper slipped back into the trees. 'Come on!' she cried out. With enthusiasm bordering on reckless glee, she pushed through a twisted grotto of knotted vines and into the hidden forest beyond. Frantically, she forced her way through branches and brambles, unimpeded by the thorns that tore at her skin. But in a handful of heartbeats she was lost in the blackness.

Bernice stopped, and with gut-wrenching dismay she realised that she was alone: neither Richard nor Gavin had followed. What's more, she had no idea which direction she had come from. Even in daylight, gloom gathered around the bases of these tall trunks. Now, veiled from the moonlight, there was nothing to guide her save half-imaginary shapes that sprang from murky shadows.

She held her breath and listened to the pop and crackle of the damp, fractured undergrowth as it gently sprang back in the wake of her passage. Then the unexpected crunch of trampled branches made her wheel around. Something thundered towards her from within the nightmarish tangle of shadows — solid, square, gleaming with a sickly pale sheen. A hard, harsh edge struck her shoulder, spinning her about. Bernice's howl of pain mingled with the angry metallic bellow of her attacker. Stunned and bruised, she managed to remain on her feet, but it charged again. The impact slammed her to the ground, forcing the air from her lungs.

Instinct told her to keep moving. She rolled over, sprang to her feet and bolted, but her assailant stayed close behind her. She felt its heavy, pounding gait shudder through the soft forest floor; heard the snapping and slapping of branches on its hard shell. It seemed unimpeded by the thick vegetation, or the crippling darkness, but Bernice knew these would be her ultimate downfall. Every hidden pothole and unseen tree root threatened her undoing, and it was with a sickening sense of inevitability that she suddenly found herself falling. The next thing she knew, she was lying face down on a mat of soggy leaves, the taste of soil in her mouth. Her shoulder burned with pain, her bruised ribs throbbed and the blood pounded in her head.

She heard the roar again: a cold, clanking, hollow expectoration of triumph. Bernice rolled onto her back, stuck in a moment of paralysing

confusion, and saw her attacker up close for the first time. Sturdy, rectangular and about six feet tall, it shambled towards her. Its skin had a glossy white lustre and was featureless save for a discreet insignia and a feebly glowing green light. As it moved in for the kill, it started to open its door.

It was a fridge.

Bernice wished she had more time to take this in. No, she wasn't imagining it. The human animal is capable of many extraordinary things when it finds itself in dire straits, but Bernice Summerfield simply lay there, because at no time had experience or evolution ever thought to instruct her on what to do when being attacked by a household appliance.

A bright stripe of light from within fanned out into a radiant beam as the door swung open. Bernice winced in its painful glare as she shrank from a fusty breath of mouldy cheese and sour milk, and consoled herself with the final thought that although her demise would not be distinguished, it would at least be novel.

She pressed herself back into the soft dirt. Her fingers clawed uselessly at the earth, and then unexpectedly closed around a sturdy branch.

Fine — so she wasn't going without a fight! She heaved upwards and thrust the branch through the open door, striking deep into its icebox. The creature howled in agony and tottered backwards, the branch still protruding from the shattered plastic flap of its freezer compartment.

Bernice staggered to her feet and ran. The furious wailing of the appliance reached a crescendo as she burst from the undergrowth onto a winding trail. She was some distance from the camp and the spread-eagled boughs of an ancient yew tree slouched across the path offered the only obvious sanctuary. She scrambled up just in time to feel the cold draught of her pursuer behind her, and fought to regain her breath as she settled into place on a suitable branch.

Could fridges climb? Bernice hoped they couldn't. The angry appliance jumped up and down, and snapped at her feet hanging just out of reach, and Bernice observed with some satisfaction that this one, at least, could not. It was nevertheless remarkably persistent, for a fridge, and it was likely that she would be stuck up this tree for a while.

There was a sharp crack and the branch on which she was sitting dipped alarmingly. Distressingly, she realised that she might be returning to terra firma sooner than she had planned. Bernice reached for an adjacent branch to take some of her weight, but it slipped through her fingers. Her perch sagged again, bringing her within reach of the fridge. She felt it brush the underside of her foot, and stole herself for that first crunch of metal on bone, when two gunshots pealed out in rapid succession. The fridge howled in pain, reeled around then dragged itself away, whimpering as it retreated into the forest.

Bernice dropped to the ground as Richard approached along the trail, shotgun beneath his arm. 'It was a —'

'I saw,' Richard muttered. 'Come and look at this.'

He led her back to a chalky embankment that rose up beside the path. Strokes of morning light were beginning to paint themselves across the cobalt sky as she followed him up the crumbling slope. From the top, she looked down along a spiny tree-lined ridge, which bottomed out into a grassy river valley. In the east, where a crashing torrent burst from the confines of a craggy gully, the first few rays of dawn were reaching up to pull clouds from the sky like candyfloss. Something was coming. She heard them; saw them. A thousand or more, leaping, whirling, snorting, stumbling, rolling and rearing as they stampeded along the flood plain.

'Gas cookers,' Richard said, and thereafter the two or them stood in mute astonishment as they witnessed the glorious spectacle pass by below them.

'I don't get it,' Laura said, upending a milk carton over her cereal. She joined the others at the breakfast table. 'What are the chances that something could evolve to look like a fridge?'

'It didn't look like a fridge,' Richard corrected her. 'It was a fridge.'

'An ordinary fridge?' Laura asked, wrinkling up her nose.

'Ordinary?' Bernice replied, perhaps sounding a little pricklier than she intended. 'The bloody thing chased me up a tree, and if Richard hadn't shot it through the pump it would probably have done for me. That's fairly atypical behaviour, even for the most petulant of white goods.'

'Maybe it didn't evolve into a fridge, but from a fridge?' Gavin suggested.

'Rubbish,' said Laura. There had always been something snide about her, Bernice thought. Perhaps she was doing the girl a disservice, but she got the impression that Laura thought 'other people' were far more trouble than they were worth.

'Oh, I think Gavin may have a point,' Professor Eastlight said. Until now he had listened to Bernice's story with quiet fascination. 'Even the most trivial gadgets are possessed of rudimentary intelligence. For instance, a tumble dryer can automatically detect the types of fabrics that are placed inside, and program itself accordingly. It seems perfectly feasible to me that such a device could develop a basic instinct for survival.'

Gavin was encouraged to elaborate. 'Survival comes as standard,' he explained. 'They have built-in fault-diagnosis and self-repair systems.'

'Quite the expert, posh boy,' Laura observed.

'Well, my father is,' Gavin replied, with a touch more humility. 'He's CEO of one of the leading —'

'Ah right,' Laura interrupted. 'King of the tumble dryers, is he? Very swish.'

'Okay, let's not waste any more time,' Richard said. He leaned over the table and dropped a series of aerial photographs in front of them. 'These are the surveys we carried out prior to the expedition.' He pointed out a

feature in one of the pictures: a pattern of solid lines and surfaces, half-hidden by vegetation. 'Some kind of structure here: buildings, possibly, or a crash site. Either way, it's the only thing on the island that might provide an explanation. We need to be ready in about an hour.'

'Oh no,' Professor Eastlight interjected. 'You want to explore? No, no — I don't think that's a good idea at all. This is not why we're here.'

Richard looked up at him in disbelief. 'This is one of the most extraordinary discoveries of all time,' he said, shaking his head. 'You don't seriously propose to just ignore it?'

'Oh, now look, Richard,' Professor Eastlight began, and the weariness in his voice suggested he'd had many similar conversations before. 'I'm not at all happy about blundering into a situation that I'm ill-equipped to deal with. The proper procedure would be to call in someone with the expertise to handle this.'

'Who?' Richard fumed. 'This is something outside anyone's experience.' He slapped the table in frustration. 'I don't believe this! You're perfectly happy to carry on scrabbling around in the dust for bits of old pot, and let the real opportunities slip through your fingers. Is that what grandfather would have done?'

Richard stormed out before his father had chance to answer. The uncomfortable silence seemed to last forever, before Bernice was finally brave enough to break it. 'Professor Eastlight,' she said cautiously, 'I appreciate your concerns, but...'

Bernice found Richard outside, perched on an equipment box with his back to her.

'When I was eight,' he said, unprompted, as she sat beside him, 'I went on my first dig. I found a sword. Imagine! That's when I knew I wanted to be an archaeologist like my grandfather. You know of my grandfather?'

Bernice nodded. Everyone had heard of Sir Leonard Eastlight. In academic circles he had been known as an opportunist, self-publicist and possible fraud. But to the popular media he had been an adventurer, wreathed in mystery and romance, whose exploits had been lapped up eagerly by an adoring public. Even his mysterious disappearance ten years ago had been a source of limitless fascination, and the wellspring of countless conspiracy theories. Ordinary people died in bed, or quietly faded away in some retirement home, but not Sir Leonard, who had been snatched away into the eternal void whilst on a routine survey trip.

'He was a great man, but him...' Richard jerked his head back at his father's trailer.

'That's not fair,' Bernice responded. 'We're not treasure seekers.'

Richard snorted. 'There are different kinds of treasure,' he said. 'But while my father remains unwilling to look beyond his little spotlight of experience, he'll never find it.'

'Well, I guess he's feeling adventurous today,' Bernice said as she stood

up, 'because he's had a change of heart. Pull your boots on sunshine, we leave in an hour.'

By ten o'clock the sun had swept the frothy morning mists aside with a dramatic flourish. The dewy dampness of night had been boiled up into a sticky, humid casserole of a day, and Bernice's rucksack pressed damply against her back.

Shortly after setting out, a flock of sandwich toasters had swooped overhead: a shifting, shimmying cloud, that twisted and turned before settling in the distant treetops. Further on they found an elderly television set sunning itself on a rock, broadcasting old episodes of Sergeant Bilko to a gaggle of excited blenders. After that they had picked their way through a grazing herd of what Gavin identified as 'thingys for shaving the bobbles off jumpers'. Every step of the way offered up some new assault on their preconceived notions of sentient life.

'So whatever happened to Occam's Razor?' Laura asked as they walked. 'I think you're getting carried away with this idea that these things are somehow reproducing. People make tumble driers, they make dishwashers — why couldn't someone have made all this?'

'Some evil genius?' Bernice suggested, ominously.

'But you're multiplying your entities, my dear,' the Professor answered as he mopped his brow. 'You're assuming that some other agency is at work, when we already know of a mechanism by which this could happen.'

They stopped in the shade of a tree festooned with steam irons, hanging down from its upper branches. Professor Eastlight reached out to touch one but it shot him a cloud of steam and rapidly curled upwards out of sight.

'Modern self-repair systems are capable of duplicating individual components,' Gavin explained. 'Why not complete units? Maybe even baby versions of themselves.'

'Well of course,' Laura scoffed. 'When a mummy fridge and a daddy fridge love each other very much...'

'Hear me out,' Gavin continued. 'If a unit created a very basic version of itself, then that "child's" own self-repair system could take over the job and build itself up into an adult version. It's more economical, and there would be less downtime in which the parent unit is vulnerable.'

'But these creatures are not just multiplying,' Bernice pointed out. 'They're evolving.'

'Good point, Bernice,' said the Professor. 'Imagine a faulty self-repair system, which introduces faults into the copies. In most instances those faults will cause the new units to fail, but occasionally they may provide a survival advantage.'

'Natural selection?' Bernice said.

Richard, who had been trailing behind, finally caught up. 'Why have we stopped?' he asked abruptly. He seemed wary, gripping his shotgun tightly

as if in expectation of imminent attack. 'We need to keep moving,' he said and carried on past them, leaving them to fall in dutifully in his wake.

'What's his problem?' Laura asked.

'He thinks we're being followed,' Bernice replied.

'Delusional,' Laura opined, confidently. 'Classic case — constantly needs attention.' She spoke with the easy authority of someone who had once read a magazine article about psychology. 'Has he told you his "sword" story?'

Bernice nodded. 'Is it not true?'

Laura shrugged. 'Have you heard of doorway amnesia?' she asked. 'Remember all those old UFO fantasists who claimed they were abducted by aliens? They were never able to describe the doorways.'

Bernice was puzzled. 'And your point is?'

'They don't remember practical details,' Laura said. 'How did they get from one room to another; how did they get undressed and placed on an examination table?'

'Alien brain rays?' Bernice suggested.

'Or they were attention-seeking nut jobs,' Laura replied. She nodded at Richard. 'His story suffers just the same. Where did this sword come from? In what context was it found? And how does an eight-year-old boy just wander onto a dig and start excavating priceless artefacts with a plastic spade? It's all in the details, you see. Or the lack of them.'

Ahead of them, an upright vacuum cleaner suddenly broke from the bushes, leading six baby cleaners behind it. It crossed the trail and disappeared into the undergrowth opposite.

Gavin turned back and grinned at Laura infuriatingly. 'Hey, if it walks like a baby vacuum cleaner, and it cleans like a baby vacuum cleaner, then I call it a baby vacuum cleaner.'

Laura resisted the urge to smash his face off.

They ate lunch beside a sparkling stream that gurgled and slopped into a crystal pool. Bernice took great delight in dangling her fingers in the cool water as a glittering shoal of electric toothbrushes darted between them. They made better progress in the afternoon, in spite of the heat, and when Bernice paused to consult the map she was able to tell them that their destination lay in the adjacent valley.

She pointed portentously to the steep sandstone ridge on their right. 'We have to get over that.'

Professor Eastlight studied the slope and sighed. 'Might there not be an easier way?' he asked.

Bernice consulted the map again and struggled to formulate a tactful reply, but her train of thought was shattered by a strange noise, a kind of Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! from above. Looking up she saw the treetops bend and sway as something moved swiftly through the tangled canopy.

Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! A flurry of leaves cascaded to the ground.

'Good grief!' the Professor breathed. Bernice followed his pointing finger, squinting against the diamond shards of sunlight that pierced the mottled leaf cover, and saw a washing machine perched delicately on a bobbing branch.

Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! It launched itself confidently into the air, looped around a thick bough and sailed gracefully overhead. It was unstoppable, majestic — until a single gunshot snatched it cruelly from the sky. Bernice watched with dismay as the extraordinary creature plunged through a fragile cradle of brittle branches and thumped into the ground with a sickening thud. Its crumpled, broken casing creaked and sagged at one corner, its door swung open, it spat out a sock and expired.

Bernice snatched Richard's still-smoking shotgun from his startled fingers, and hurled it into the undergrowth. 'It was harmless!' she stormed. 'Look at the rust. Look at the way the rubber seal on the door has perished. It wasn't capable of hurting a fly!'

Richard said nothing, but held her scornful glare with a look of equal contempt. Then, turning to retrieve the gun, he stopped dead as the familiar outline of a refrigerator lurched out in front of him. Bernice's blood ran cold; the ragged bullet hole in the door, the trickle of fluid that spitted and fizzed from its flank — this was the very same creature that had attacked her.

'Run! ' Richard shouted. 'I'll hold it off!'

Bernice looked round and saw that the others were paralysed with indecision. 'Well, you heard him, run!'

She turned back to Richard. He was slowly edging towards the stock of his shotgun, seen protruding from a clump of ferns. The rogue fridge, wheezing pitifully, mirrored his every move. Richard made a bolt for the gun, but the fridge suddenly rushed him.

Bernice grabbed Richard's arm and snatched him away. 'Leave it!' she told him. The Professor, Gavin and Laura had already disappeared from sight around a teetering outcrop of rock. Bernice and Richard hurried after them while the fridge, dragging its injured carcass pitifully but relentlessly onwards, tottered doggedly in their wake. But when they rounded the rock the others were nowhere in sight.

'Where'd they go?' Bernice stopped. To the right was a solid sandstone wall; ahead and to the left the forest thinned out and gave no opportunity of cover.

Richard was in no mood for speculation, and motioned for them to keep moving. He pressed on and Bernice was about to follow when a hand reached out and touched her forearm. She uttered a brief, startled cry that instantly robbed her of every last shred of dignity, then relaxed when she saw Laura beckoning her from a fissure in the rock.

She called Richard back and the two of them squeezed into the crevice, pressing themselves against the cold stone. The rhythmic thump, drag, thump, drag of the approaching fridge grew louder. It drew level with the

opening and paused, rocking slightly as if sampling the air. Then it moved on, the noise of its painful motion gradually receding into the distance.

Bernice waited until it was well out of earshot before thanking Laura. Richard was more concerned about his father.

'The Professor and Gavin have gone on ahead,' Laura explained. 'This fissure emerges on the other side of the ridge — we've found a ship!'

The broken black metal hull of a space freighter dominated the valley, overgrown and entangled by creepers and vines like a mechanical Gulliver in Lilliput. Its control deck was buried in a huge bank of earth that had been thrown up before it, but the aft loading ramp was lowered and Laura led them up and into the gloomy, cathedral-like cargo bay inside.

Bernice paused for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness. It was almost exactly like walking into a darkened cinema just before the film is about to start, save for the absence of popcorn.

'We've made a discovery,' Gavin said brightly. He and Professor Eastlight were bent over a data terminal, the flickering images from the screen illuminating their faces.

'By "we", Gavin means "he",' the Professor corrected him humbly. 'I myself can never get the hang of these contraptions. But Gavin here has cleverly accessed the data core. This ship, the Comet, was carrying a consignment of faulty domestic appliances.'

'It crashed, but it was no accident,' Gavin added. 'The controls were locked into a planet dive before the crew escaped.'

'The ship was deliberately scuppered?' asked Laura.

'Interplanetary fly-tipping?' Bernice suggested.

'Bingo!' a voice exploded from the dark recesses of the hold. 'Give that girl a coconut!' The words were shadowed by a slight crackle and fizz, falling like the cascading sparks of a firework before plunging them once more into black silence.

Bernice looked to her companions, but they were as puzzled as she was. Falteringly, she took a few steps deeper into the hold. She could see a faint flickering glimmer at the back.

'Ditch the ship and claim on the insurance,' bubbled the voice again. 'A smart lawyer might even get you compensation as well. "Have you had an accident at work that wasn't your fault? Would you like to stitch up your employer for a fat sack of cash?" Job's a good 'un.'

Bernice watched the glimmer become a glow, blinking intermittently. One light became many, like a cloud of distant fireflies, flickering and popping in the night. Then, with a rush, a series of greasy fluorescent lights thrummed into startled life, scattering a sickly purple light over a confusion of cables and panels, and casings and pipes.

At first glance it looked like junk: the buckled and bent carcasses of several dozen domestic appliances, heaped together in homage to the god of built-in obsolescence. But here was purpose; here was life. Pumps

whirred and rattled in rusted housings, feeding strange liquids through washing machine hoses, bubbling up through the clear plastic cylinders of liquidisers and food processors. Fans whirled and whistled, making dirty strings of cobwebs billow and sway, and a line of vacuum cleaner bags softly inflated and deflated in a hypnotic rhythm. And there, at the centre of this macabre Heath Robinson contrivance, amongst the riveted sheets and ribbons of cables, was a human head.

'Father.'

Professor Eastlight stepped forward as the soft whisper of his own voice echoed back to him.

The face that stared back at them from its hideous mechanical vault was pale and grey, lank silver hair plastered across its scalp with grease and oil. But Bernice recognised it. It had stared out at her from a hundred magazines, smugly announced its latest discoveries on TV chat shows, beamed annoyingly from the dust jackets of countless coffee-table books. This was Sir Leonard Eastlight.

'You took your time getting here, Lad!' what remained of Sir Leonard barked, as he set his gaze upon the Professor. His head was entirely immobile, his jaw hung limply and his speech was slightly slurred. But those eyes — those eyes were as fierce and as piercing as they had ever been.

'Still, you're here now,' he spat from thin, cracked lips. 'No time to waste. We have much to do.'

'How?' Professor Eastlight muttered. 'How can you be here?'

'I'm a survivor,' Sir Leonard boasted. 'Always have been. I was half dead when my escape pod crashed in the jungle. I found myself fleeing from a ravenous horde of toasters; then I was attacked after inadvertently disturbing the nest of an electric carving knife. Eventually I found my way here.'

'And this?' Professor Eastlight gestured at the motley collection of scrap that somehow seemed to be keeping his father alive.

'I lay here, broken, in the darkness,' Sir Leonard explained. 'The lifeblood ebbing from my shattered form. It seemed I was finished, but how could fate possibly deliver me — me, of all people — to such an ignoble end? I had to survive and so through the appliance of science I cheated death. Using the fauna of this place for my pattern book, I replaced my blood with coolant, stored my vital organs in a chest freezer, then cut away the injured flesh and swapped it for aluminium and plastic and steel.'

'Magnificent!' Richard declared joyously.

Sir Leonard's cold gaze fell upon his grandson. 'Eh?' he grunted. Never had Bernice heard so meagre a statement seasoned with such disapproval. 'Who's this?'

'You remember Richard,' Professor Eastlight reminded him.

Sir Leonard sniffed. 'Is this the one that joined the convent?'

'No,' answered the Professor. 'That was his sister.'

`Richard!' Sir Leonard's overcast frown suddenly cleared. 'I remember him — whiny little creature. Always thought you needed to kick some life into him.' He suddenly giggled. It was an inhuman, mechanical sound, and it made Bernice shudder. 'Do you remember that holiday?' he blurted merrily. 'You buried that sword! Go on, you remember — cheap plastic sword that you buried in the sand for him to find? For the rest of the summer he went round telling everybody that he'd discovered this "priceless artefact". We laughed about that for years!'

Professor Eastlight looked anxiously at his son, but Richard would not meet his eye. Bernice felt it was time to take charge of the conversation. 'Sir Leonard —' she began, but got no further.

'Is this another one of your brood?' Sir Leonard cut in, addressing the Professor.

`No, no, Bernice is —'

'Jolly good,' Sir Leonard responded, and treated Bernice to a leer. 'In that case I may I decide to have a pop at you, my dear.'

Bernice laughed. 'Really? I'm flattered, but you're not my type,' she returned. 'You haven't got the watts.'

'Oh don't imagine that I'm any less of a man just because of my present reduced circumstances,' Sir Leonard purred. 'There's nothing wrong with me that a new fan belt wouldn't fix. What about it? No? Okay.' Without missing a beat he turned his attention to Laura. 'What about you love? How are you fixed?'

'All right, that's enough!' Bernice snapped.

Her outburst brought him up sharp. He said nothing, but fixed her for a moment with a hateful stare. When he finally spoke, his voice was level and contained, and he addressed himself to the Professor.

'We must make arrangements,' he said.

'Arrangements?' Professor Eastlight asked.

'For my return to the public eye,' Sir Leonard explained. 'This will eclipse everything I've done before. Cooker Island! Come see the cooks as they frolic and play in their natural habitat. Wonder at the majesty of the leaping dishwashers. Gasp in astonishment at the mighty giant vegomatic and its wondrous array of interesting attachments.'

'We didn't see a giant vegomatic,' said Gavin.

Sir Leonard ignored him. 'And at its heart, the main attraction — the Eastlight Experience. My life and work celebrated in a fascinating collection of interactive displays, animatronic installations and painstakingly reconstructed dioramas. We must begin at once!'

'No,' Professor Eastlight said simply.

Sir Leonard glared at his son in silence, but the Professor held his gaze, unblinkingly. It was the Professor who spoke next.

'This environment is unique throughout the entire universe,' he said softly. 'I will not allow it to be exploited for the sake of some tawdry theme park.'

`You never did have any vision,' Sir Leonard retorted with disgust.

`Father, the universe has moved on,' the Professor said. 'You can't just turn up after ten years in the wilderness and churn out the same old nonsense as before.'

`This is my comeback,' Sir Leonard said, and now the booming voice was shot through with something pitiful and small. 'I have skulked here in the darkness for a decade, planning my return to the light. You would deny me my one final chance at glory? You, who is happy enough to bask in the light of my legacy?'

`I have suffered because of your legacy,' Professor Eastlight said. 'I've lived in your shadow, where nothing grows, blighted by a name associated with chicanery and showmanship. And yet, I have the things that you never had: a family, a proper career and the respect of my peers.'

`Transient, ephemeral pleasures,' Sir Leonard opined. 'They wither and fade. Only fame is immortal.' He seemed lost for a moment, spirited away by proud memories of more celebrated times. Then he was suddenly back in the present. 'Everything dies,' he said. 'Everything ends.'

He was looking past them now. The deck shuddered. Instinctively, Bernice turned around and saw the silhouette of the fridge dragging itself up the loading ramp, shaking and spluttering but refusing to die. It seemed to recognise Richard; it drew steadily towards him, and there was nowhere he could run.

Gavin found a spanner close to hand, picked it up and made to attack.

`Put it down!' the Professor ordered. 'No sudden movements. We don't want to alarm it.'

`This is the end,' Sir Leonard pronounced, taunting them. 'Can you not feel the breath of destiny blowing cold about your neck? Can you not feel our story drawing to its completion?'

With a penetrating roar, the fridge lunged at Richard.

`The end!' Sir Leonard screamed.

Professor Eastlight threw himself at his son, hurling him aside. The fridge connected with him instead, knocking him to the ground, then careered onwards into the collection of equipment that enshrined Sir Leonard. There was a dull crump of an explosion, then a cloud of black smoke rolled out and engulfed everything.

Hand to her mouth, Bernice fought her way through the smog. As it cleared, she saw the stricken fridge lying on its back, its door wide open, kicking and bucking as it tried to get up. Seizing the opportunity, she snatched up a crowbar and thrust it downwards, deep into the beast's innards. There was a horrible, sickening crack. The fridge spasmed, the tiny glowing light on the front panel slowly died away and it was still.

'It's dead,' she breathed.

`So is Sir Leonard,' said Gavin. He was standing beside the smouldering remains of Sir Leonard's life support, and the look on his face made it clear that there was nothing he could do. Fluid bubbled weakly from split

tubes, and Sir Leonard's head hung limply and immobile at the centre of his makeshift contraption.

`Benny.'

Bernice twisted round. Laura stood helplessly with tears clouding her eyes. She tried to speak but the words died to nothing. Mortified, Bernice saw Richard kneeling over his father's broken form, and hurried to join them.

`It's all right,' she said automatically. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

But as she spoke it became obvious to everyone that Professor Eastlight only had a few moments left to him. He reached out and his hand found Richard's. 'The sword,' he said.

`It doesn't matter,' said Richard, his face twisted and distraught.

`No, you don't understand,' the Professor said, struggling to form the words. 'I remember the light in your eyes when you found it; I can see it - the passion, the drive, the wonder... I was so proud of you.'

His grip on Richard's hand relaxed, his head fell back and he was gone.

Bernice found Richard perched on a log some distance from the freighter, watching the late afternoon sunshine turning to purple and gold. 'Are you all right?'

Not really,' Richard replied. He looked at her and smiled. 'But I'll be fine. Thanks Bernice. You know, thanks for everything.'

She returned his smile.

`It's getting late,' Richard said. 'We ought to be getting back.'

Bernice agreed, then drew a breath before broaching the next subject. 'We've been talking — Gavin, Laura and me — about what to tell people about this place.'

`I think it's best kept a secret,' Richard said, before she could continue. 'That's what my father wanted. Besides, who's going to believe a tall story like this?'

`I suppose it's all in the details,' Bernice replied, and she slipped away to fetch the others.

In a nearby treetop a radio alarm clock started singing. Elsewhere, a potential mate answered with a traffic report. Perhaps, before long, they'd be joined by the patter of tiny watches.



+We like your story. But we are not sure whether it is true or not.+

There were now three skulls unearthed, along with more bits of skeleton, chunks of military armour, and pieces of burnt out weaponry. Nothing active, thankfully, but Bernice wasn't quite willing to write off that threat just yet just because it hadn't been raised for a while. The skulls seemed intrigued by her stories, and she wanted to keep their minds on those.

`Tough crowd,' she said, in reply to their doubts. This raised an interesting question. 'How would you know whether it was likely or not?'

+We are beginning to remember some things. We were made to remember.+

`Ah, a back-up recording,' Bernice said, gesturing approvingly with her trowel. 'Clever. A black box recorder for the human mind.'

She looked at the mess of an excavation she'd created in her urgency to dig out the skulls. So much for preserving the scene. But if the skulls could remember 'their' deaths, they could tell Jasmyn, and Bernice would have fulfilled her assignment, albeit in a roundabout and frankly disturbing way.

`I don't suppose you...?' she trailed off. The time wasn't right. Not yet. She needed to distance the skulls, as she couldn't help thinking of them, from the bodies they'd once been part of, the lives they were remembering. She needed them to be able to investigate those back-up memories with a degree of impartiality, and she needed to persuade them into that mind set.

`I don't think you're machines as such, not really,' said Bernice. She paused, and the skulls didn't make much attempt to fill the gap. She looked back at her excavation, which still had some way to go.

Bernice sighed — she was going to be here for a while, so she might as well give them the whole story. 'There was another machine, you see, one which I think was made from some of the same materials that are in those chips of yours. Those chips that aren't quite you.'

The skulls seemed to take these vagaries at face value.

`I'd better start at the beginning. We, that is myself, my son Peter, and his father Adrian, recently had to leave the planet we'd been living on for the last few years. Peter spends some time with me, and some with Adrian.

`After a recent visit to Earth, Peter and I met up with Adrian on a quiet world, isolated like this one. It was a small planet, one that had few of the resources that attracted the attention of the major corporations or colonial interests, but it was capable of sustaining life, providing that life lived simply and concentrated on its farming. A peaceful community from a minor religious group had settled there a couple of hundred years before, and were very polite to any visitors. It was the perfect place to meet if you didn't want to attract attention to yourself.

`It was dull, but pleasant, and after events in Buenos Aires — don't ask, that's another story altogether — we were glad to be somewhere quiet. Adrian and I spent some time discussing Peter's future, and what we would do next. There were problems I'd left behind that I knew I needed to address, but I needed time to plan my next move. In the mean time we got to know the locals a bit, I tried their ale, and Adrian helped them build a barn. It was all rather charming.

`Peter, of course, was bored senseless. That's boys for you, especially when they're at the stage he is. He's a clever boy, and I'm proud of him, but the thing with clever children is they can never know enough, and they don't know when to stop pushing.

`Peter had asked a few questions, made some conclusions of his own, and pieced together a bit about the local religion. They'd started on Earth, back in the 19th century, by a man who had once had a strange dream. So the story went, he had dreamed that he could build a mechanism that would be God. Not a machine to talk to God, or a special altar or anything like that — an actual mechanical god. The God Machine, as Peter called it.

`The details were sketchy, and even Peter had enough tact to not push the locals too hard, even when their secrecy infuriated him. It seemed that the cult had actually built this God Machine, but that it was lost for many years following the Great War in the early 20th century. A century and a half later, long after the cult had scattered and their descendants forgotten about the whole thing, someone found the God Machine, and the beginnings of the community we were living in formed. After a while, they took to the stars, and found a new home.

`Of course, once Peter knew that the God Machine was actually there, in the small town we were staying in, he simply had to see it. I don't know

what he expected, whether he hoped to disprove all their ideas by finding out the machine was just a box, or whether he just wanted to talk to it. I suppose he's had a strange life, either expectation wouldn't be entirely unreasonable.

`When Adrian and I realised what he was up to, that he intended to break into a secret room in the main town hall, we instantly determined to put a stop to whatever he planned. He was our son, but these people had been nothing but kind to us, and they deserved better than to have a silly little boy poking his nose into their private business.

`By the time we caught up with him, he had already found it. It didn't look like much — a big square beast of wrought iron, large cogs and wooden beams, set in the centre of a modest, whitewashed room.

`We found Peter talking to it. A lot later, when we were all back home, I asked whether the machine had spoken back, but Peter claimed not to remember.

`Whether it spoke or not, I don't know. But it certainly reacted to our presence. I could feel an agitation in the air as I approached, a familiar energy. At that point, Peter and I had recently been on a journey back into time, one where I'd travelled by alien technology, and he had ended up meeting something called the Wyrn. I suspect it was that contact which allowed the God Machine to do what it did.

`As we approached, cogs began to move. We could see a rough, polished black stone at the heart of the machine, and it began to vibrate. What happened then could be described as a temporal short circuit, one which looped us back to the very creation of the God Machine, back in wartime on Earth. In that connection, the black stone shattered and we were moved, and separated. Thankfully, I managed to find a recent acquaintance when I arrived in the past. Peter and Adrian were not so lucky.'

Benny paused. She wasn't sure the skulls were following all this, but at least they weren't threatening to blow anything up.

`Anyway, we'll start with me as I'm the one telling the story. Although in my own defence, I'm not the only person to recount these events, and so if my role seems prominent, blame the other writer. Believe me, he's used to bigger egos than mine.'



A Gallery of Pigeons

Jim Smith

John Watson, 1914

I have devoted many volumes of writings to the cases I investigated alongside my friend, Mr Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street. I have also written with, as I shall reluctantly concede, considerably less public notice on topics as diverse as spiritualism and the need to reform the British Army's medical practices. The narrative that follows in these pages does not fall comfortably into any of the categories that comprise my 'canonical' work, but I hope it will prove both interesting fare and be instructive to those who have commented, perhaps unkindly, on some of my more esoteric work.

These events occurred during the period covered by the very earliest pages of the first volume of my memoirs of the Great War. I had been inadvertently swept up in the joyous crowd that celebrated outside Buckingham Palace on that, in my mind even then, dreadful day in August when His Majesty's Government declared war on Germany and her allies. I would never have joined that throng by choice but I was busily making a home visit to an elderly patient in Victoria and foolishly attempted to make my journey home on foot via The Mall and Trafalgar Square. I did not know then, indeed I could not have known then, how different and how, in so many different senses, catastrophic that war would be, but I mourned its opening none the less. As someone who had seen war firsthand, and who has known many others who have seen it likewise, I could never celebrate the opening of a conflict, no matter how just its cause may seem. So it was that the excitement of the crowd, mostly young and mostly from the lower orders, shocked me greatly.

Holmes had a sense of it, I think, a sense of what that which we now call The Great War would be. I had somehow not caught his meaning when he had spoken to me of the nature of the coming conflict. (As my more avid readers may know, on the second of August that year, less than forty-eight hours before the declaration of hostilities Holmes and I had worked together on a case. He had defeated Von Bork, an agent of the Kaiser who had attempted to steal details of many of Great Britain's plans for her own defence, as well as records and plans of her newest and most advanced weapons.)

Earlier that summer my wife Jean and I had gone to see James Keir Hardie, not a man with whom I agreed on many subjects, give a speech in Trafalgar Square on the subject of conflict in Europe. While there I had felt that the great mass of people were repelled by the notion of a

European war. Being bustled along by singing patriots, each seemingly with a Union Flag in at least one hand, on that dreadful, sunny August day, demonstrated to me that I was wrong.

The enthusiasm of the masses waned in time; conversely my own distaste for the conflict and how it was managed led to me to become more involved in the war than I could have imagined becoming at its outset. Opinion is distinct from duty and once it had become clear that the war would be a long one, I had cast around for any service that I could perform for King and Country in that time of great national need. At the suggestion of the hero of Mbuto Gorge, I had accepted a Colonelcy in my old Regiment. I was preparing, to Jean's great despair, to embark for France. It was my intention to attempt innovations in the treatment of battlefield injuries (a topic about which I have written at some length elsewhere and with my opinions on which I shall not trouble you further).

I was in the study of my practice rooms when the boy brought me a telegram. Naturally assuming it to be a military matter, I opened it at once. Instead of orders or information it contained the curt message:

COME TO PALL MALL

BRING YOUR DOCTOR'S BAG

M HOLMES

Initially my eyes missed the initial before "Holmes" and my heart leapt at the idea of reunion, even in these troubled times, with my old friend. Alas, this message was from the elder Holmes brother, Mycroft. A more rotund and immobile variation on his younger sibling and one who used his great deductive powers, powers which his brother Sherlock considered to be superior to his own, in the service of the state. Naturally, I obeyed his summons and within an hour I was met at the door of Mycroft's home by his housekeeper Miss Grose, a young woman who had taken her Mother's position in Mycroft's service during the all-too-brief reign of Edward. She hurried me upstairs and to the door of a room on the first floor landing. Mycroft, corpulent and slow-eyed as ever, stood by that door with his hands behind him staring straight ahead. He barely seemed to notice my arrival but just as I thought I would have to make myself known to him, he jerked out of his torpor. 'Dr Watson,' he drawled pleasantly, 'I hope I didn't inconvenience you by requesting your presence?' I assured him that any inconvenience was a small one and so he continued, informing me that he had a matter that required a medical man in whom he could place an absolute trust.

Mycroft opened the door to the room and ushered me into a nearly dark and silent study. In the gloom sat a dirty, dark-skinned man in rags. He leaned against the wall muttering, almost imperceptibly under his breath.

Before I could begin a medical examination of the figure Mycroft began to explain to me that this man had appeared in this room at Pall Mall this morning. Literally appeared. The door to this windowless, first floor study had been unlocked this morning by Miss Grose and the man, who could not have found his way into the house, never mind the study, without several sets of keys, none of which had ever left Miss Grose's possession. The 'how' and 'why' were, of course, perplexing but Mycroft's immediate concern was for the poor fellow's health and state of mind.

'Is he muttering all that "The barges flop! Drip drop!" stuff again?' asked a voice behind me, and I turned my head in surprised at the familiar tone of the voice that had made the remark. I was not mistaken. There stood Bernice Summerfield, decked out in the highest fashions of that summer. 'Hello John,' she said, smiling in a way that pulled me back a quarter of a century, 'Nice to see you. I'm just visiting. Ignore me. Pretend I'm not here.' I made to ask her how and why she was here but Mycroft interrupted and informed me that Bernice was staying with him for a time, while hoping to return home in the very near future. Bernice then obliged by answering my next question before I had a chance to ask it, informing me that my new patient had a habit of muttering repetitive nonsense about barges and death. Nonsense that rather had its gravity damaged by his repeated uses of the word 'plop' as some kind of onomatopoeic device.

Remembering why I was there, I bent to I check the patient's pulse. His skin was cold to the touch. The result was surprising and I so I checked again. My suspicions confirmed, I placed a hand under his nose and found what I expected. I was about to announce my remarkable findings when something made me take the man's face in my hands. I looked at his eyes and again felt a shock of recognition, one that pushed the announcement I intended to make to the company out of my head for a moment. Instead I exclaimed that I knew this man, or rather that I knew who he was. A startled Mycroft moved across the room to join me and asked if he too should have recognised the man. I shook my head and told him that it was one Ludvig Cooray, the illegitimate son of a minor German aristocrat. Ludwig was an inventor, involved in a scandal with the Lord Straxus in Ludwig's own country of Ceylon some twenty-five years ago. Mycroft seemed startled at the name of Straxus and I marveled yet again at this extraordinary man's recall of events of which he had merely been informed.

'What's he doing here?' wondered Bernice out loud.

'The coincidence is remarkable,' noted Mycroft and I took this as my opportunity to explain something else remarkable about his guest. He had no pulse and no breath. He had the appearance of, indeed made the sounds of, one drawing breath, but was not taking in or expelling any air from his lungs. 'So what we have here,' Mycroft suddenly declaimed, 'Is a man who seems to be alive, but who is not engaged in any of the processes that keep one in that state?' I nodded affirmation and then, as if he were attempting to perplex me further, Ludwig Cooray began to speak.

‘From the slimy branches the grey drips drop,
As they scraggle black on the thin grey sky,
Where the black cloud rack-hackles drizzle and fly,
To the oozy waters, that lounge and flop
On the black scrag piles, where the loose cords plop
As the raw wind whines in the thin tree-top.
Plop, plop.’

Mycroft shook his head and remarked that his words, while ugly, were very calm and ordered for ravings. His confusion meant that he was even more surprised than I was when I was able to tell him what the words meant — or rather what they were. Bernice asked me what I meant by ‘Rondel’ and if I were referring to the star. I had not noticed that I had spoken that word as Cooray jabbered and was again momentarily taken aback. I assured her I did not mean, indeed did not know of, the star of that name and was referring to the work of a minor and undistinguished poet, one Theodore Marzials, the author of both a poem called ‘Rondel’ and the confused diatribe that had poured from Ludwig Cooray’s mouth. Bernice admitted surprise that their mystery man should be quoting exactly from the work of an ill-favoured poet and Mycroft countered by saying that the man’s seeming ability to live without natural processes was rather more surprising. ‘We should treat these two questions as separate,’ he announced, ‘and attempt to combine any explanations we discover at a later time.’ With that he marched out of the study, leaving Bernice and myself standing by the muttering Cooray.

‘Oh, don’t worry about him, John,’ said Bernice, with surprising brightness, ‘He’s gone to have a think. Tell you what, I’ll ring for some refreshments and you and I can have a little chat.’

Theodore Marzials, 1882

I am late in from the library this evening. Patmore was unhappy, unhappy because I stood up and did one of my little turns in the reading room. I tried to explain it to him later, to make it clear that I have always done what I did today. That I am, as I said this afternoon to the assembled readers, the darling of the British Library Reading Room. He would have nothing of it. He is a pompous oaf and knows nothing of art or joy. All I try to do is bring a little colour into the dusty environment that is our mutual place of employment. People love me for it. They love me in a way they will never love him. That, you see, is really why he called me in to remonstrate with me. It was nothing to do with complaints from the readers. There were not any complaints from the readers. There could not have been complaints. Not from the readers. I am their darling. I am.

I was so angry I took a long route home. I eschewed the underground and avoided the omnibus. I plodded my way out of London proper and towards Camden Town. The weather, if not my mood, was indifferently and occasionally bright and the walk was pleasant, despite the smell of horse doings. Once at Camden, I took the canal path and for a while stood and watched sinewy men working the pumps, moving a long, narrow gypsy craft from one step water to another. That calmed my mood and as I wandered I came to smoke a pipe and — if I am an honest man and I am — I quite lost my bearings and all track of where I was.

I looked up from my perambulations and realized with surprise that I was on the very spot where I had composed that which is perhaps the most brilliant of all my poems. 'A Tragedy' it is called and it is the jewel of my only collection, my contribution to the 'canon', published some dozen years ago now. Of all my poems it came the most easily to me; oddly given its dark subject. I had simply stood by the canal, at almost that spot I came to again today, and the verse came to me as if direct from the muse. It was complete and unhurried. I had not even needed to rush to write it down. All its words were ordered in my mind and remained so during my walk home, after which I set it to paper with the minimum of effort.

It was perhaps unsurprising that my wanderings should have taken me to that spot, one so key to my posterity. I have been thinking of my poetry more often of late and of that poem in particular, that poem that came upon me all of a rush when my collection had almost gone to print. Then too I'd had a dark day. Midsummer rain had pounded the dome of the reading room and cold, unseasonal winds howled down Great Russell Street. Then too I'd wandered in search of something unknown, something other than what I had. The two days were as alike, as the bard had it, as my fingers is to my fingers. Ha ha.

The last, most surprising resemblance between today and that day in my recollections was not yet apparent to me as I had that thought. It soon would be. The sun sneaked out from behind a cloud and its radiance

caught a reflection on a hitherto unnoticed object near my foot. I bent down and plucked it up. I brought it close to my face to better inspect it. As I did so, there was a sting in my head and a taste in my mouth; the taste was acrid, almost burning. The object was a small piece of glass or maybe quartz. It was black as jet at some points, transparent as a window at others. I gasped in surprise.

That surprise, my dear diary, was the result of a simple fact. I already had a piece of glass or quartz or whatever it was, exactly like it at home. Yes, yes, perhaps should have furnished you with this information sooner, my dear diary, but I am trying to spin out the drama of the moment to best effect. It is a technique that poets — and I am a poet if I am nothing else — are keen to utilize.

Is it not remarkable, though? That I should pass two days so similar in the same place? It was such an odd confluence of events that even now, and mere hours have passed, I find themselves doubting the veracity of my own recollection. This I must not do. It did happen and it is for this reason that I must record both it and my doubts here on your pages.

As I turned my finding in my fingers again the taste in my mouth and the sting in my head increased rather and then, rather suddenly, there was static shock. This was rather too much for me and I'll confess I dropped the glass. I dropped it and watched as it bounced as it hit the floor, hit the broken edge of brick floor, and plopped into the murky water of the canal. 'Plop!' it went, 'Plop!' and it was gone.

I had no time to be disappointed at the loss of my trinket. That loss, however small, had made my mind up for me. This city would not take another thing from me, no matter how small or insignificant, wonderful or strange. As that glass hit the water ('Plop!') I knew I would leave London for fresher climes. That is why I am late in from the library today. I have made a decision. I shall no longer work in that dusty place, where my works are not appreciated nor are my words looked on with favour. I do not need the pennies they deign to purchase my attendance with. I have my royalties. I have my pension. I can retire. Move away from this dung-smelling, ever-growing city. Away. Away. To the countryside, somewhere rural and fine where I can concentrate on my poetry until my heart is content.

Yes, that is what I shall do.

John Watson, 1914

Bernice and I were talking in kitchen at Pall Mall when the door opened and Mycroft Holmes strode in. He glanced across at Bernice and, almost smiling, asked; 'Could it — could he — be some sort of Kinematograph?' Bernice's eyes narrowed and Mycroft seemed to take this as a cue to continue his train of thought. 'Is the man who is the image of life without the processes of life just that? Is he simply the image of life?' Bernice stood up, grinning. Clearly she followed Mr Holmes' train of thought, which I will freely confess I did not.

'I'm so stupid,' replied Bernice, 'And you are quite, quite brilliant, Mr Holmes.' She got up from the table and paced towards him, a grin spreading across her face. 'I've been looking for a twentieth-century solution to what I'd assumed was a twentieth-century problem, but it's really nothing of the sort!' With that she darted out of the room.

There followed an uncomfortable silence, which I broke by I asking Mycroft to explain further what had passed between them. This time he did smile. Not so long ago,' he replied evenly, 'It was not uncommon to read of men scared out of their wits by the Lumiere Brothers' then remarkable feat of projecting the image of a locomotive onto a bed sheet.' He paused, generously, allowing me to catch up with his explanation.

I asked: 'Is perhaps Ludwig Cooray nothing more than a more sophisticated version of the same thing? Is that what you are saying?'

'Exactly!' Another voice cut me off and Bernice strolled back into the kitchen, holding a small piece of black glass at eye level. 'This is a memory chip with a small projector attached. They're mostly used by the military. It contains a looped recording, capable of limited interactivity, which is projected into the mind's eye of anyone within a small enough radius.' With that she clicked the glass between her fingers and the image of Ludwig Cooray appeared, hunched as before, except that he was now against the door to the scullery. As I struggled to grasp exactly what it was that Bernice was showing me, she turned the image off and assured me that she would furnish me with a clearer explanation in due time. Bernice and Mycroft conferred and agreed that while what Cooray was had been solved, there were still the questions of how he arrived in Mycroft's study and what exactly he was saying to be answered. 'You, Dr Watson, have provided us with our only useful clue to unravelling this mystery,' said Mycroft quietly, 'The name of Theodore Marzials'.

Bernice Summerfield, 1914

There's something romantic about travelling by railway train in this period. Or there should be, according to cliché. The sound of the steam and the urgent whistle as you make your way across the platform. The privacy of a wood-panelled carriage and the comfortable, yet solid, nature of the seats. It all adds up to something. Something that people can get nostalgic about. The nostalgia I'm feeling is a bit more literal though. I'm experiencing the actual pain of return. I am, while physically comfortable, deeply unsettled by the number of soldiers on our train. It isn't that I don't like a man in uniform (and Watson's face when I complimented him on his was a picture, incidentally), nor is this my usual knee-jerk, semi-serious, professional academic's dislike of men with guns. Well, not entirely. These aren't the armour-plated, drugged-up, psyched-up, psych-controlled murder machines of seven hundred years from now. These are boys in khaki and green, standing around with smiles on their acned faces, puffing on their first cigarettes. They're telling each other obviously fictitious stories about girls. They're like a freshman class at any University on any planet and at any time that I know of and yet very, very soon they all will be dead. Dead in circumstances that they can't possibly predict and I can't possibly prevent. That's the sharp of being an occasional time traveller. You have to stand back and watch terrible events you know about unfold precisely because you know about them. It's the very fact that you know enough to want to interfere that means you can't. Or so a friend told me once. Twice. Three times. Possibly. I'm still not one hundred percent sure I believed him, but it's always been enough to hold me back. Which is probably what he wanted. Manipulative git.

The black computer chip in my shawl pocket sits there uneasily. Although I made light of what it is to Mycroft and John I am all too aware of what these things are and how they can be used. Yes, they're storage devices but they can also record from, and imprint onto, human brains. Take your thoughts from you and spit them out into someone else's head. They can make you someone else, someone you don't want to be, someone someone else wants you to be. I'm looking at the imminent casualties of one war, while carrying around something that could easily cause the casualties of another. Which probably has, in fact.

The journey down to Devon is a long one in 1914, even when the companionship is that of John Watson (Mycroft feigned indolence and overwork and asked John to accompany me to Devon in search of Marzials and John was happy to agree.) John Hamish Watson is a good, decent and occasionally even brilliant man that many people from my time would happily give various DNA scrapings and genetic rights for forty minutes' conversation with. He knows I'm unsettled by something. He's more sensitive than he'd ever say out loud or in print. I'd managed to get John to understand the memory chip that had appeared at Pall Mall and even

that it must have appeared out of nowhere, materialized, in this place and time for some purpose. What we really had no idea about was why it'd happened or why the recording of a Victorian inventor from Ceylon should be recorded on it. Or why said inventor was quoting the insignificant poet that we were now, in consequence, on our way to see.

Theodore Marzials opened the door of his tumbledown, stone cottage at the second knock and, after some persuasion, let us in. Watson's celebrity and the sense of assurance provided by his uniform clearly helped us gain access. Marzials was an odd looking man. Long blond hair flopped over his eyes in a curtained arrangement and he exuded an odour that was faintly narcotic. He moved with an awkward burly effeminacy and he was obviously far from sober. When I queried this with John he muttered something about 'Chlorodyne' under his breath and I've no reason to doubt his medical expertise. Once seated in the cramped, untidy, comfortless reception of Marzials' home, we explained our errand to him. Perhaps it was because of his severely altered state that I didn't feel I had to hold back in my explanations or questions concerning our case. For the most part Marzials said little, except for a mumbling diatribe about a man called Patmore when I mentioned some of Marzials' own poetry. That all changed when I showed him the memory chip I had brought with me. Marzials looked at me, then at the chip, then at me again. He was puzzled and oddly elated. His voiced squeaked. 'Where did you get that?' he asked, with genuine excitement. He explained that he had one that was 'Just the very image of it' and that he once found, then lost, a second (or rather a third). He scurried off to a corner and, after much ruffling around in drawers, gave a little squeak of triumph. He dashed over to me and waved something under my nose. It was another memory chip. The same shape, size and colour. Probably the same make. I asked if I could hold it and he reluctantly agreed, letting it slip into my hand slowly as if he were afraid it would disappear.

I tried to turn the chip on, but unlike the one I'd brought from Pall Mall it was beyond use. I turned Marzials' chip over in my hand and was taken rather aback by what I saw. I silently indicated to Watson what I'd observed and I was sure he noted it, though not its significance, too. Oddly this tiny piece of information told me almost everything I needed to know. John and I made our excuses and left at the earliest opportunity. Marzials was a sad figure but no more so on our departure than at our arrival and I was glad to be away from the claustrophobic air of his den.

I sent Mycroft a telegram from the railway station telling him everything that had happened. While I'd worked out an important piece of our very odd puzzle, at that point I couldn't make head or tail of how to connect it with the rest, but I thought that if I could put as much information as I could in front of him, he was more likely than most to figure the whole thing out.

John Watson, 1914

On our arrival back at Pall Mall, Bernice and I were welcomed by Miss Grose and quickly ushered into Mycroft's study. The great man was there, clearly expecting our arrival at precisely the moment it happened. (Bernice suggested later that he had simply added the time it would take our train to the average travel time by Hansom from Paddington to Pall Mall).

'I have a solution to the question that faces us,' said Mycroft, his hands latched together behind his back.

'So do I,' said Bernice, 'Or at least a partial solution.' Mycroft beamed with pleasure at this. I had expected him to be displeased, as his brother would have been, at being denied the opportunity to explain something to an ignorant audience. Clearly the bond between Bernice and Mycroft, though I knew little of it, was a strong one.

'Do you have the glass?' he asked her and as she passed it to him he asked her what she had concluded concerning it.

Bernice shook her head. 'You tell me,' she said.

Mycroft smiled, his voice was calm, but he had the air of a man performing a magic trick, 'Let us suppose that these pieces of black glass are not in fact pieces of black glass, but a single piece of black glass.'

Before I had a chance to splutter at the absurdity of this comment, Bernice took my hand and gently explained to me that she had realized that Marzials' black glass was in fact the same object as the one that had appeared at Pall Mall when she was looking at them both together. That they had, as she had indicated to me, the same serial number etched on them. Moreover, they were both, logically, the same object as the second glass that Marzials had found on the day that he decided to retire from London. 'It's been moving through time,' she explained.

Mycroft nodded and completed her explanation for her; 'It is, it has, it will be, moving backwards in time. If we were order the events from the perspective of the glass, 1914 would come before 1882 and 1882 before 1873.' I let this odd idea sink in, and then asked if Marzials had effectively dropped the chip in 1882 before he picked it up in 1873 and Bernice nodded affirmation. Mycroft held the chip aloft between thumb and forefinger and said pointedly, 'At some point in the future, this item will disappear into the past, to take its place in events that have already happened'.

Bernice nodded again. 'What I don't understand,' she began, 'is where it came from in the first place.'

'This is where I can help,' said Mycroft, and indicated a sheaf of papers across his desk. 'These are the plans for the "god machine" you told me about on the night you first arrived. It was designed and partially constructed by Ludwig Cooray in Ceylon in 1888:

'Ludwig disappeared that year,' I interjected, now I was on firmer ground, 'Holmes — that is to say your brother, Sherlock Holmes, thought he'd been murdered by Lord Straxus'.

Mycroft replied that he had little doubt that this was so and that if Ludwig had not been killed he had been 'disappeared' in some other manner by Straxus or one of his henchmen. 'This 'chip' must have belonged to Straxus. The simulacrum of Ludwig was recorded on the black glass before he disappeared and it remained within his machine, remained there for centuries.'

Bernice slapped her forehead with her open palm and exhaled sharply. 'Of course! The chip came back with me.' I glanced at Mycroft and again saw confirmation in his look. 'You have told me already of the accident that brought you here,' he said, 'with that piece of information, the explanation is complete.'

There was a silence that seemed to indicate that Mycroft considered the matter to be over and I must have rather spoiled the moment when I asked about Marzial's poem and Ludwig's repeating of sections of it. Mycroft looked alarmed; 'I had not considered the matter of Marzials' lack of poetic skill to be of much interest,' he said finally, 'I have neglected to fathom an explanation for this aspect of the problem.'

I was surprised to hear Bernice laugh. 'But that's the easy bit!' she said, finally, 'That's the one really straightforward, literally, thing about the whole thing.' I asked her to illuminate Holmes and myself on this point. She shrugged. 'The chip didn't just have the recording of Ludwig on it,' Bernice said, 'It's a combat chip that belonged to Straxus and it was full of all kinds of weird stuff, some of which — and I'm speaking from experience here — humans can't even properly perceive.' Mycroft grasped the idea immediately: 'Hence the bad poetry — it was Marzials' way of trying to make sense of the information the glass pushed into his brain.' Bernice took the glass from Mycroft and stared at it. 'You can see here that the chip is cracked across the flux circuitry element. It must have been damaged on its journey back through time and the information on it got all jumbled up. It ejected all that rubbish into Marzials' brain just before it stopped working forever. Or rather it will. This chip is actually still currently working.' As if to prove it, she clicked it on, and Ludwig Cooray's image spluttered into seeming life in front of her. There was a dreadful crackle and suddenly I had a dreadful sense of vertigo and a sting behind my eyes. At that moment, the chip in Bernice's hand sparked and made a raucous noise. Then it, and the image of Cooray disappeared.

'Correction,' said Mycroft quietly, 'It was working until you did that. It will now shortly expel its contents into Theodore Marzials' brain, some forty-one years in the past.'



`The piece of the machine, of that black, crystalline substance, I think that was the same stuff as was used to network the Danpetroan Army,' said Bernice. 'Slightly different appearance, but related properties. And I think that's what you are.'

+We are the black stone?+ said the skulls.

`Yes. While it's true that computers can develop personalities, I don't think the human-made parts of these telepathic implants are even still working. I think whoever made these, like the Danpetroans and the man who built the God Machine, created such unstable technology by using a substance with natural thought-carrying properties. What I don't think they realised is that the reason the black stone can carry thoughts is that it is, or at least is under certain circumstances, well... alive.'

+But why did we come to life now?+

Benny shook her head. 'That, I'm not sure of. There was a lot of prophetic stuff about meteorites related to the God Machine cult, so I suspect that's where the big chunk of black stone there came from. Maybe being buried in the dark, away from other minds, has allowed you to evolve, find yourself?' She trailed off. 'I don't know, I'm afraid.'

+Neither do we.+

`I'm sorry, I wish I could tell you more. I'm sure answers will come in time. I don't know what to say.'

+Tell us more about what happened with this Machine.+

Bernice exhaled heavily, blowing her fringe up. 'Well, you know most of what happened to me. I suppose that there's the matter of how we got back to our own time, but that's not really my story, as such...'



The Firing Squad

Eddie Robson

When the food went missing, the villagers looked for obvious explanations. Most assumed one of the Public Welfare children was responsible: the orphans copped the blame for almost anything that might have been their fault. Some suggested there might have been an escape from the nearby military prison, and that the escapees had been looking for sustenance. A few suspected that someone within the village had done it: livelihoods had been ruined by the war, some families were hungry, people were desperate.

If they had seen what really happened, the story it could well have become a part of local mythology. Such things have happened hundreds of times in small towns and villages around the world. The stories are fondly held by residents but generally disregarded by incredulous outsiders, who are unable to distinguish them from the fanciful nonsense that often hangs around such places. (In fact, the fanciful nonsense sometimes appears more credible than the stories which result from alien visitation. We live in a strange universe.)

But nobody saw the culprit. Considering he was eight feet tall and resembled a humanoid wolf, he went about his crime with remarkable discretion, and the event was soon forgotten altogether.

In the next town he was not so lucky. In the next town, there would be a new local myth.

When the townspeople discovered Adrian in the butcher's shop in the dead of night, he knew how it must look. He didn't want to do this: he had seen the war that was happening on these people's doorstep, he knew they must be living in reduced circumstances. Without thinking, he apologised.

This only made things worse. Until he did that, the townspeople might have imagined that he was just some kind of strange animal they'd never seen before — maybe one who had been caught in Africa, sold to a circus and then escaped. Even the fact that he was wearing clothes might have fitted into this notion somewhere: after all, circuses often dressed their performing bears. But then he said 'I'm sorry,' in English — and even those who spoke no English at all recognised that he was using human language. He no longer merely seemed strange, he seemed impossible.

The townspeople froze momentarily on the shop threshold, and Adrian had a couple of seconds to decide what to do. He could try to talk to them more, but he knew no French and had no facility to translate. Would they listen to him long enough to understand that he meant them no harm?

Unlikely. Which meant he had to get out of there. Without harming anybody, preferably.

His course of action was clear. Not desirable. But clear.

Adrian snarled, lifted his hands and bared his claws (he could only bare two on his right hand as he was using the other fingers to hold the bag). The townspeople tensed slightly. Then Adrian ran at them, shouting as loudly and wildly as he could. He threw himself into the run, banking on the humans getting out of his way — if they didn't, he would knock them flat and there was a risk that he'd trample them to death. Fortunately they did move, very swiftly.

As soon as Adrian was out of the door, he swerved and ran down the street, still making loud and disquieting noises in case he encountered anyone else. He could hear people running after him, but with his long stride he was sure he could outpace them. A couple of shots whizzed well over Adrian's head. That, he supposed, was only to be expected. As he reached the outskirts of the town, he veered off the road, put his head down and kept running.

Eventually he found himself in a wood, and allowed himself to stop and rest. He knew that when he stopped it would be hard to get going again, so he wanted to be safe when he did. He sat against a tree and looked inside his bag: he'd only managed to grab a couple of bits of meat before they found him, but it was better than nothing.

Several thousand generations ago, Adrian's people had been predators, able to go for days without eating. He could have done with that ability now. The price of being civilised was becoming dependent on civilisation. Adrian found himself outside it, and was struggling to live in a way that would have come naturally to his ancestors. He told himself that the reason he'd refrained from attempting to catch and kill any animals himself was that he needed to save his energy for travel, and it was far more efficient to steal it. The truth was that he just hated the idea of turning predator, and for all his strength, he wasn't even sure that he could carry it off.

Fortunately his stomach hadn't lost the ability to cope with raw meat. He bit into a large hunk he'd stolen from the butcher's counter and wondered what kind of meat it was.

All things considered, this was probably the least dignified experience of his entire life.

It was, at least, a relief for Adrian to be away from the place where he'd landed. Either by hideous accident or malicious design, the 'God Machine' Peter had been so keen on had dumped him in the middle of a battleground. The two warring sides had apparently been at an impasse at that moment: an impasse disturbed when he fell into the mud and both sides assumed him to be something to do with the other. Not wanting to take any chances, both had shot at him. Already disorientated by falling

through a hole in time, Adrian didn't need any encouragement to drop to the floor and wait for the noise to die down.

When it did, Adrian raised his head slightly and looked around. He could see nobody. He could see very little of anything, as the ground was wildly uneven: he himself was in a shallow ditch. Judging from the occasional noises he could hear, there were encampments of troops on either side of him. The people who had shot at him had done so from safe positions, probably holes in the ground. He needed to move to a position where he might be able to stand and look for a way out. That would be best done at nightfall, so he waited.

Whilst Adrian was waiting, he caught snatches of conversation from nearby. The voices sounded human, although he didn't recognise the language. Was he on Earth? If so, when?

Once it was dark, Adrian very slowly crawled towards a high ridge up ahead. Where the ground rose up, the misshapen landscape would afford sufficient cover for him to stand. Even though he was keeping flat to the ground, he was conscious that someone might still see him — so he tried to move in an animal-like fashion. If he was indeed on Earth, they were liable to mistake him for one of their animals, in which case those on either side of him would hopefully be less likely to see him as a threat. Hopefully. Although they might just as easily shoot him for sport.

Eventually Adrian made it to a bank of earth, where he was able to lie and rest for a moment. He had no idea how much time had passed since landing here. From what he was willing to risk looking at — which was not much — all was quite still. He was able to gain a greater understanding of what was happening here. There was a deep trench on either side of him, and though the light was minimal, the fact that Adrian could not see the end of either trench suggested to him that he was on the border of disputed ground. Those on either side of him were trying to hold the ground they had and gain more from the other side. If there was a way of going around either of these trenches, one of them would have done it - which meant there was no way round. He would have to cross one of the trenches. The nearest was only about ten strides from where he was now. He wondered whether to crawl there too, or whether to risk standing and running. Crawling would take a level of nerve he wasn't sure he possessed. He only had one side to worry about now, and if he simply made a dash for it, they might not react fast enough to do him any harm.

Adrian had almost reached a decision when hundreds of infantrymen suddenly bounded from the trench and hurled themselves forward. Adrian rolled backwards in shock, pressing himself closer into the bank of earth. But they weren't focused on him at all. Improbably, nobody seemed to see him at all. The ones closest to him were dashing around the bank, heading towards the opposite trench — and from the opposite trench, guns spat colossal numbers of bullets into their chests and heads. The soldiers fell in waves, but still more of them emerged from the trench and surged

forwards, the ridge Adrian was using for cover creating a slight bottleneck. Forgetting his earlier difficulties for a moment, Adrian stared into their faces as they shuffled past him: all were grimly focused on what lay ahead of them.

Adrian took his chance. He leapt up, dashed in behind the soldiers and dropped down into the trench. Once there he was seen by several people, but nobody reacted fast enough to stop him as he scrambled over the other side of the trench and away into the night.

From there, Adrian had simply kept walking, eager to get as far away as he could. The journey to where he was now had been arduous, but nothing else had been so bad as those early hours. A second line of reserve infantry had posed a lesser problem for him, but he'd managed to get through. Before long, Adrian's observations confirmed that he was indeed on Earth, and although his knowledge of the planet's history was vague, he realised that he was in a time long before the inhabitants had made contact with aliens, or even ventured into space. The concept of life on other planets was barely even common currency. Which posed a sizeable problem for Adrian. He couldn't exist here. The best he might hope for was to live as some quasi-mythical beast in the mountains, occasionally glimpsed by unreliable witnesses. He wasn't interested in that. He needed to get home — back to Peter, back to Bev.

After two days spent walking across the countryside away from the battlefields, Adrian had been approached by someone who furnished him with a possible solution.

It happened whilst Adrian was sleeping in an abandoned house just outside a large city. The woman who tracked him down that morning — a small brunette woman in her fifties, apparently human, elegantly dressed, with an expression that suggested she was lightly amused by everything that played out in front of her — was incredulous when he said he didn't know what the city was called. 'I don't care how far you've fallen through time,' she said in an English accent, 'you must recognise Paris when you see it?'

Adrian had heard of the place, but had no idea what it looked like.

'It really is splendid,' the woman said, gesturing with the gun she was casually holding in her left hand. 'You must visit it sometime. Not in this particular time of course, quite out of the question. They're on edge as it is, you'd cause a riot. They might be able to handle a giant talking wolf walking upright in about... oh, say a hundred and forty years' time. And even then you'd have to be on your best behaviour.'

'Who are you?' Adrian asked.

The woman introduced herself as Lucinda Wharton: 'Not my real name, but it's the one I'm going by at the moment. You're probably going to ask how I know you fell through time.'

Adrian nodded.

Lucinda held up a piece of equipment Adrian didn't recognise. It looked more advanced than anything from his own time, never mind this. 'Picked up the temporal disruption on this. Did you really land in the middle of Verdun? I hear it got rather nasty there two days ago.'

'I haven't got a clue what it was called,' said Adrian.

Lucinda's expression changed to genuine sympathy and approval. 'Jolly good work getting out alive. I'm glad I managed to find you — you're still giving off still some trace energy after your fall, but hardly any. By the end of the day you'd have been completely undetectable.'

'What were you looking for me for?'

'I thought you might appreciate some help. I can easily go away again if not,' she said, pointing at the door.

'Of course I want some help,' Adrian said irritably, refusing to plead with her to stay as she obviously wanted him to. 'But you've got to see that it looks weird, you showing up out of the blue like this.'

Lucinda chuckled. 'Yes, of course. I'm not just being mysterious for the fun of it, I didn't want to give too much away until I'd had a chance to assess what sort of chap you are.'

'Oh yeah? And what sort of "chap" am I?'

Lucinda smiled. 'I'm in Paris, in this time zone, on business. My business, by the way, is none of your business. I've got an appointment with a lady in Jaca — you know where Jaca is?'

Adrian shook his head.

'It's on the other side of the Pyrenees, I've brought some maps. I'm set to meet her two weeks today. I'll be taking the train: I'm afraid I don't think it will be practical for you to accompany me, and I don't have a vehicle I can lend you, so you'll have to go on foot. Judging by your speedy progress over the last two days, I think you can manage it.'

Lucinda, 'said Adrian. 'I reckon I can, but I'll have to keep my strength up. I nicked some potatoes and apples on my way here, but to go that far, that fast — I really need meat.'

'Spoken like a true Frenchman,' Lucinda said. She went to the doorway, retrieved a sack from outside and tossed it to Adrian. Opening it, he discovered two entire roast chickens, some bully beef and a large quantity of bread. Adrian immediately tore the legs off one of the chickens and cleaned each one in a single bite. 'Charming,' said Lucinda.

'Sorry,' said Adrian. 'But I am absolutely bloody starving.'

Before she left, Lucinda also gave him a small medical kit, which again looked more advanced than his own time period — 'Never leave home without one. The past is always absolutely bloody filthy,' she told him - and the maps she'd mentioned: one of France, with Jaca just visible on the edge over the Spanish border, and another of Jaca itself. A suggested route from here to there was marked on the former, the rendezvous point was marked on the latter. 'If all goes well I'll meet you there at 3am, but if not, you're looking for a woman named Conchita.'

Adrian thanked Lucinda and she left. He munched his way through the rest of the roast chicken, thinking about ulterior motives.

Moving largely at night and sleeping during the day to decrease the risk of being seen, Adrian made the food last for another day and a half before he stole any more. Buoyed by the success of his first, undetected attempt, his second had been bolder and that was why it had failed. He spent another day living off fruit and vegetables, but his progress across the countryside was being stymied and he faced the fact that he needed to find more meat. He would take whatever he could find at the next farmhouse he passed.

As it turned out, the next farmhouse he passed was on fire.

Thus far, Adrian had done his best to keep a low profile. Stopping and helping these people was not in keeping with that aim. However, the decision to do so was hardly a decision at all. He knew he was well-equipped to help, and if the people who lived here were disturbed by his appearance, he could simply run away as he had at the butcher's shop. But he had to try.

Adrian ran towards the flaming building: the light grew larger as he approached, and not just because he was getting closer. Glancing through the windows, he could see that the fire was spreading fast, its glow now intense compared with the speck he'd first sighted from a distance. A woman and a boy of maybe seven or eight had just emerged from the front door, spluttering and gratefully drawing fresh oxygen. He glanced down at them: he couldn't understand what they were saying, but it was clear there were still people in here. The woman seemed to be readying herself to go back in, so Adrian dashed to her side and put a hand on her shoulder, indicating that she should stay where she was. She looked back at him, surprised and confused but too disorientated to cry out. Adrian turned and charged into the flames.

The blaze was still mostly confined to the back wall of the main downstairs room, although it had spread to the curtains in the window to one side. A chair between them was also aflame. A curious thought flashed through Adrian's mind: how had it started? A builder by profession, he had considerable experience of fire safety, and he couldn't see anything obvious. But then, he knew little of how these people lived.

The stairs which led to the upper floor were almost impassable — for a human — and Adrian assumed that the other humans were upstairs. Logically, if they'd been downstairs they would have escaped by now. As he approached the burning steps, he heard shrill panicking voices which confirmed this. There were more children up there: how many he couldn't be sure, but he hoped it was not more than he could carry. Although Adrian's fur was singed wherever the fire licked at it, the skin underneath was extremely tough and even this level of heat wasn't troublesome to him. However, he did have to be careful of breathing in the smoke, so he needed to work quickly. Covering his mouth with a huge hand, he dashed up the

steps, feeling the eroding structure shift a little beneath his weight.

Bursting onto the landing, Adrian saw a carpet of flames and four doors closed against the heat and smoke. He quickly opened each door in turn, glanced into each room and then closed each door again. He found four people together in the second room and nobody in any of the others. His first appearance in front of the four people had caused no reaction beyond surprise: the combination of heat, smoke and fear probably made them assume they were seeing things, and then the door had closed. When Adrian returned, closed the door behind himself and stood before them to make a quick assessment of the task at hand, they simply stared dumbly back.

There was a man of about forty, a boy in his early teens, a girl of about five or six and a crying baby, less than a year old — Adrian couldn't tell if it was a girl or a boy. The windows up here were too small to get out of, even for the children: in his desperation the man had tried anyway, and broken a couple of the panes, but the metal bars of the frame were an obstruction he hadn't been able to clear.

Adrian fought his instinct to save the oldest boy first — it made no sense, of the three children he would survive up here the longest — and instead he pulled a sheet from the bed in the corner and enveloped the two younger children in it. At this point the man started to protest, which Adrian didn't have time for. Adrian held up a hand in a pacifying gesture, which he hoped would work. If the man tried to get in his way, Adrian might have to put on a show of aggression, just to get rid of him. But the man seemed to understand, or thought better of challenging the giant wolf-man who'd just appeared in his burning house.

Adrian gathered up the children and, holding them close to his chest (the baby squirmed and Adrian took care to hold it firmly without hurting it), pulled the door open and dashed outside. He closed his eyes against the smoke: he didn't need to see, he knew where he was going. Once at the stairs he followed the smell of fresh air, faint against the choking smoke, hurtled down the increasingly unstable steps and stumbled outside. Placing the children on the ground by their mother, he paused only to take several deep breaths before returning inside.

Back at the room, the man and boy seemed a little surprised to see Adrian again. Perhaps they'd expected him to carry the children off to the woods to eat them or something. Adrian picked up the man and boy, hoisting one on each shoulder. Neither struggled, probably weakened by the diminishing oxygen up here. Wrapping them in a sheet would be impractical: Adrian would just have to run as fast as he could. Either way, he would make this quick.

Without another second's delay, Adrian charged through the house. One of the steps cracked underneath him on the way down, but he was going too fast to fall through: it threw him off stride slightly, but he made it to the bottom without toppling and hurtled through the door. He put down

the man and boy and reunited the family. As they clutched each other, they almost seemed to forget Adrian was there. It didn't matter, he still had more work to do.

In the yard stood a barrel. There had been periodic heavy rain over the past few days and, as Adrian hoped, the barrel was filled with rainwater. He picked the barrel up, brought it to the house and cast the water inside. He soaked the nearest walls and floor, which would hopefully prevent the fire from spreading — but he needed much more. Right now, the blaze was so fierce that more than half the water he threw in there was instantly turning to steam. The crucial thing was to save the structural beams: the rest of the house was stone, and if those beams could be prevented from burning through then the structure might be salvaged. Sniffing the air, he detected water nearby: a stream, a couple of hundred metres away. He ran to it, refilled the barrel and returned to the house.

In front of the family's astonished faces, Adrian repeated this for forty minutes. His huge strides covered the ground between house and stream with amazing speed. Before long the man and the eldest boy joined him: together, they were about a tenth as effective as Adrian on his own, but they couldn't sit by whilst he worked tirelessly to save their home. The woman took the sheet Adrian had brought the children down in, dunked it in water and used it to smother parts of the fire. The stairs collapsed, making it impossible to access the upper storey — but Adrian was able to hurl the water high, sloshing it into the hallway, and a ladder was brought from the barn which enabled him to climb up and attend to the blaze in the other rooms.

Eventually, the fire was out. Adrian collapsed on the lawn, hardly aware of anything around him. He certainly didn't notice — and neither did anyone else — the man in a French soldier's uniform, carrying a metal box under one arm, who dashed quietly away from the sodden, ravaged farmhouse and into the night.

When Adrian opened his eyes, the two young girls were staring at him. He wasn't sure where to look, so he was grateful when the man came over and offered him a pitcher of water. Adrian nodded, drank from the pitcher and handed it back.

Then the woman approached, bearing a plate. The plate was filled with bread, meat and cheese. She seemed to be apologising for something as she handed the plate to Adrian. Adrian pointed at the food — For me? — and the woman nodded. As he ate, he realised what she'd been apologising for — although the fire clearly hadn't reached wherever the food had been kept, some of it did taste of smoke. Nevertheless, Adrian was very grateful and did his best to show it. Then they gave him wine. It was a little sour and full of sediment, but it tasted good to him.

Before he left, he went back inside the house and looked around. The main downstairs room was gutted, the stairs were ruined. It was a shame

he couldn't stay to help repair it: that was far more his forte than fire-fighting. He could do a good job on it. But even with his strength, crafting and fitting replacement beams would take a day or two and he couldn't afford to stay in one place for even that long.

Shortly before dawn, Adrian pointed in the direction he had to travel and uncertainly waved goodbye (was that a universal human gesture? Did they do it in France? He wasn't sure). The woman said something, then dashed back into the house. When she returned, it was with a bag she had filled with food, and she handed it to Adrian. He said 'Thanks,' hoping that they understood him, and turned to leave — at which point the three children (not the baby, who was still crying periodically) rushed forward and hugged him.

They didn't let go.

Adrian wondered how long this was going to go on for.

Eventually the man pulled them off him. Adrian got the impression that the children wanted to keep him, and he suddenly felt uncomfortably like a household pet, but he realised that their reaction was understandable in the circumstances. They were only children.

Adrian continued on his way, glad that something positive had come out of being dumped in this time and place.

Two nights later, the exact same thing happened again.

Well, not exactly the same. This time it happened in a small town. Adrian's food supply had run down again, and he had just been skulking about on the outskirts, hiding from view and mulling over the prospect of another raid, when he heard the shouts. Mostly one word, over and over, which he assumed was the French for 'fire'. He saw the glow over the tops of the houses, and headed towards it.

When he reached the house that was ablaze, on a corner of the town square, he saw that the fire had taken a strong hold. The front doorway was totally impassable. The house was three storeys high: was anybody still in there? Judging from the panicked voices running through the crowd, Adrian guessed that there was. He ignored their astonished reaction to him as he stepped to the front, steeled himself and ran inside. As with the farmhouse, the stairs were in an alarming state as he ran up them, and he was by no means certain that they'd support him on the way back down.

A search of the house turned up just one person: a deeply distressed elderly man on the top floor. Adrian's appearance did nothing to alleviate his distress, but again Adrian considered the simplest policy was to ignore his reaction and get on with what needed to be done. Adrian hoisted the old man over his shoulder and, ignoring his struggles and cries, looked back down the stairs. Adrian didn't fancy his chances of getting them both down there alive. He was already concerned that the old man had inhaled too much smoke to survive. Going to the back window, Adrian looked out

and saw that the house went back further on the ground floor than the other floors, with a sloping roof that joined the main back wall just below the first-floor window. That would have to do. Adrian punched the window out — the entire frame, to leave no jagged edges — and manoeuvred himself onto the window-ledge. The old man was utterly terrified, speaking to Adrian in a pleading voice — but Adrian was shutting out everything, concentrating on getting his landing right.

He didn't, not quite — after plummeting down, he landed too heavily on his right foot — but it was good enough, and he was able to spring from there to the small garden. Adrian carried the old man round to the front and delivered him to someone who looked like he might be the town doctor. People were casting buckets of water into the flames, and passing the buckets back. Adrian followed the buckets to their source, a water-pump in the centre of the town. The pump was stiff and painfully slow in filling each bucket, so without a second thought, Adrian pushed aside the pump's operator and took over. He was able to work the pump with at least double the speed of his predecessor and before long he could see the appreciation on the faces of those working to put out the fire. Sadly, it quickly became clear that the old man's house would not be salvageable and the firefighters concentrated on preventing the fire from spreading to the house adjacent to it, or to the travelling fair whose tent was pitched close by.

As the fire was dying down, Adrian caught sight of a commotion nearby and stepped over to investigate. The crowd was backing away from a soldier. The soldier looked very young to Adrian, and he held a heavy-looking metal box in one hand and a gun in the other. The arm that held the gun was partly exposed by a large burn-hole in his jacket and shirt, and the skin beneath was badly charred — but the injury looked old, not fresh. The soldier's face was pale, his expression impassive. The crowd stared at him: Adrian gathered that he wasn't welcome here, and was presumably one of the enemy. The soldier stared back at them, looking from person to person.

Then he levelled his gun and shot one of them.

The victim, a middle-aged woman, fell back against the crowd. Most of them gathered around her, but a few dashed after the soldier as he ran from the scene, heading down the road that led out of town. Adrian fought his way through the crowd and joined them. The soldier turned and loosed a few more shots, none of which hit their targets but did slow down the pursuers, which had probably been the intention anyway. Adrian kept up the chase, reckoning that the soldier had little chance of hitting him, but the soldier dived into the back of a van, which then drove away. The vehicle was marked with a symbol, a red cross. Adrian recognised this as an indication that the van had a medical purpose — or was supposed to. The soldier's actions had not exactly been in keeping with the Hippocratic Oath.

Trudging back towards the burned-out house, Adrian was greeted warmly by the townspeople. He couldn't see the woman who'd been shot: presumably she'd been carried away to see the doctor? He wanted to ask somebody. 'English?' he asked. 'Anybody speak English?'

As it turned out, this time there was someone in town who spoke a little English. In the course of a broken, hesitant conversation, Adrian established that the old man he'd saved seemed to be OK, but the outlook for the woman who'd been shot was uncertain. Her flesh had been awkwardly torn by the bullet and although the doctor had got it out, her shoulder was a mess. Adrian asked to be allowed to see her. His request was granted without hesitation.

By the woman's bedside were some people who Adrian guessed were the family, as well as the doctor. Adrian politely pushed them aside: they murmured between themselves as he leaned over the woman and looked through the items in the medical kit Lucinda had given him. Thankfully, the labels were in English and he was able to identify one vial as an antibiotic and another as liquid skin — both of which they had versions of in his own time, although he was hoping that these would be even more effective. He applied the two vials to the wound in that order. There was some slight protest from the others in the room, until they saw the effects of the second vial. The liquid spread across the raw flesh and, in a matter of seconds, an uneven white layer had formed. A few seconds later, the new skin had read the DNA of the skin around it and altered to mimic it, turning pinkish. Although the wound underneath was still visible, healing would be all the quicker and the wound wouldn't get infected. The family looked on in amazement, hesitantly placing their fingers near the new skin but afraid to touch. Adrian nodded to them and left the room.

Walking outside, Adrian saw that it was almost dawn. His friend with the limited English guided him to another house. Inside was the old man (who thanked Adrian via translation; Adrian learned the French word for 'thank you'), as well as a large quantity of food, to which Adrian was invited to help himself. As he ate, he talked some more with the English-speaker, telling him of the fire at the farmhouse. He gathered that many rural families were so poor as to rarely be able to afford meat, which made him feel guilty for having taken so much from his previous benefactors. Adrian also commented on the strangeness of encountering two fires in such a short time: it was strange, wasn't it? His new friend shrugged: fires happen, to see two in a week was not all that unusual.

Once Adrian had eaten well and restocked his bag, he left before the adulation became too embarrassing. And in contrast to the town where he'd been caught stealing the food, a very different myth sprang up regarding the night they were visited by the wolf-man.

The third time it happened, Adrian started to become suspicious.

The burning building this time was a village hall: it was the dead of

night, and Adrian was the first to raise the alarm. He ran through the streets, looking for water but also shouting Feu! Feu! at the top of his voice.

Whilst he was helping to put out the fire, standing in the centre of the burning building trying to douse the flames, Adrian heard a voice inside his head.

+We're both doing well out of this+ said the voice. +Keep it up. Don't ruin it.+

Adrian gave no response to this, assuming it was a hallucination brought on by tiredness and fumes.

+Although+ the voice continued, +I don't actually need you, as such. Don't forget that.+

What do you mean, both doing well? thought Adrian.

+You're getting fed, aren't you?+ the voice responded, its insinuation perfectly clear.

Adrian bristled. That's not why I'm doing it, he thought. That's not it at all.

+Better than stealing though, isn't it?+ said the voice. +For your conscience, I mean. It's obviously not better for the people whose property burns.+

Are you suggesting that I started these fires?

+Oh no, not for a second. I started them.+

Adrian looked around. You? he thought. Who are you?

+Sorry, can't stop to chat. Stuff to burn.+

The voice went away, and Adrian was aware of how long he'd been spending in the middle of the fire. He realised others would be aware of it too. He raced out of the hall, briefly explaining in English, 'I thought I heard someone trapped inside, but I was wrong.' They couldn't understand him though, and Adrian realised he was only drawing attention to the situation. Buckets of water stood at his feet, so he picked up two and ran back inside.

When the fire was under control, Adrian leaned on a nearby tree to take a breather. It was then that he saw someone sneak into the hall through the back door: a soldier. Not the same one who'd shot into the crowd at the scene of the previous fire — this one was wearing a different uniform — but like that other soldier, he held a metal box. Adrian discreetly followed him inside and, rather than leap to accost him immediately, watched what he was doing.

They were in a back room, where a stack of wooden chairs that had been stored in the corner had caught fire and collapsed into a heap. The pieces were still gently alight, but would burn themselves out before long. With his back to Adrian, the soldier knelt down in front of the pieces, put his metal box on the floor and opened the lid. Adrian moved around, trying not to make any noise, to get a view of what the soldier was doing. Over the man's shoulder, Adrian saw a small flame leap from the wood and plunge

into the box: a glow filled the interior of the box, the soldier closed the lid, picked up the box and stood.

It was then that Adrian decided to make his move. Standing directly in front of the doorway so that he blocked it entirely, Adrian cut a menacing figure for the soldier as he turned to leave the building. Again, Adrian noted, the soldier was pale, ill-looking even, and blank-faced. There were holes in his uniform that had been caused by fire: Adrian could see scars on his torso underneath. The soldier didn't react at all to the sight of the wolf-man in front of him. Had he seen stranger things than Adrian?

Adrian expected the soldier to make a break for the front of the hall. That would work, because Adrian knew he could cover the ground faster than the human and would be able to grab him easily. However, the soldier did something entirely different. He took a couple of steps in Adrian's direction, held the box out in front of him and opened the lid.

A jet of flame shot from the box, directly into Adrian's face. Adrian covered his eyes with his hands and staggered back. As he fell to the ground outside, he heard the soldier running past him. By the time Adrian recovered, the soldier was long gone. Somewhere on the edge of the village, Adrian could hear a motor start and then fade into the distance.

Adrian considered pursuing, but he was extremely tired and hungry, and so wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to eat before he left. He helped to put out what remained of the fire — which took no time at all — and when the villagers thanked him, he took the opportunity to ask very politely for some food, using what French he had learned on his previous escapade. They did give him what he asked for, but as he ate Adrian detected mutterings among them. He realised what they were asking each other: Who had started the fire? Suspicious glances started to come his way, and Adrian remembered that he was the one who'd discovered it. And they'd seen how the flames didn't seem to affect him, so although he'd helped, his life hadn't really been at risk. And, ultimately, he had benefited from the episode.

Realising how it looked to them, Adrian hurriedly said his goodbyes, picked up what food he'd been given and left town. As day broke he found a secluded woodland spot, a good distance from the village, and as he drifted off to sleep he wondered when it would happen again.

Adrian awoke in the late afternoon and consulted his map. He was close to a town called Montauban, and making very good progress considering his fire-fighting stops. As things stood, he was on course to be in Jaca more than a day early for the rendezvous.

Which meant that, when he saw the van with the red cross on the side again, he felt he could afford the time to investigate.

Adrian had spotted the ambulance from a distance and continued to follow it at a distance, hiding where possible behind trees, walls, uneven ground and whatever other cover he could find. Even when he was forced

to diverge from the ambulance's route, even when he lost sight of it completely, he found that their routes would always converge before long. They had been following roughly the same path for hundreds of miles, and as this continued to be the case, Adrian felt sure that they shared an ultimate destination. He was quietly pleased with himself for having kept pace with it on foot, despite having had to stop and rest regularly — but this was because the vehicle was extremely slow, and had to keep to the smoothest terrain it could find. In many ways it was more surprising that it had kept up with him.

This continued overnight and through the next day. In all this time the ambulance stopped only to refuel, or when it became stuck. Adrian observed that there were at least five soldiers in the ambulance, perhaps more — all wearing different uniforms. They appeared to be driving in shifts and sleeping in the back, so they had no need to stop for sleep as Adrian did: he forewent rest and ate the remainder of his food on the move, in order to keep following the ambulance. His only rest came when it stopped moving. From the pattern of events up to this point, Adrian had a fair idea of what would eventually happen and he intended to be there to prevent it.

Adrian followed the ambulance through another night and day. His remaining food ran out during the second night, but he kept moving. He knew what was at stake. He knew that he could potentially save lives if he kept up with the ambulance.

Finally, a little after midnight, the vehicle stopped on the fringes of a town. Adrian hid nearby and watched as one of the soldiers got out, holding the metal box. Adrian quickly formulated a plan, one which would work best if enacted very quickly. So he broke cover and ran towards the ambulance.

The driver's cab seated three at most, and Adrian guessed that there were probably fewer than that in there. That gave him the best odds. He walked lightly to the side of the ambulance and stood with his back to it. He was at the correct angle to see into the cab via the wing mirror, and could see that he'd guessed correctly: there were only two of them in there. But this meant that the driver could potentially see him, so he needed to act now to maintain the element of surprise. Adrian inched closer to the passenger door, flung it open and grabbed the nearest soldier. Pulling the soldier to the ground, Adrian knocked him unconscious with a glancing blow to the head and grabbed his gun. By this time the driver had come across to see what had happened, and Adrian duly did the same to him.

Adrian tried to get a grip on the gun he'd taken, but the housing for the trigger was too small to accommodate his finger. The other soldiers, having heard the tussle outside, emerged from the back to help their fellows. Adrian wielded the gun as if he was able to fire it, hoping it would give them some pause for thought. It didn't, but it did provide something to cuff them with — which he did, one by one. Adrian recognised two of

them as the soldier from the village hall and the one who had shot into the crowd in the town before.

Adrian examined the back of the ambulance. There was very little in there, some scraps of food and medical supplies — not much to suggest that the space had been inhabited by several men for several days. Adrian did find a set of basic tools, including a rope. He took this back to the unconscious soldiers, placed them sitting up in a circle with their backs to each other, and restrained them as best he could. The soldiers all stank: like him, they'd clearly not changed their clothes throughout this long journey, but he had at least jumped into the odd stream for a wash. Each of them bore extensive burn marks on at least one part of their body. Adrian looked into their faces. They looked like dead men. Perhaps they were, perhaps the fire needed them to be.

Looking up, he saw a flickering light coming from inside a house on the edge of the town. He tied off a decent knot and ran towards the light.

On the way there, Adrian encountered the soldier who'd walked into the town. He was running back the other way, still holding the box, and he stopped when he saw Adrian: for the first time, Adrian realised that the man's face had been badly burned on one side, causing him limited vision in his right eye. Some distance away, two men were chasing after him. Evidently, this time around the act of starting the fire had been seen, and Adrian presumed that this was not in the plan. Either the soldier was planning to simply run until his pursuers gave up and focused their efforts on putting out the fire, or he was planning to lead them back to the van where an ambush would take place. Whichever it was, Adrian had just put a stop to it.

The soldier tensed. He didn't attempt to attack Adrian with the fire in the box as the other one had, which confirmed certain suspicions in Adrian's mind. Instead the soldier shifted the box to hold it under his arm, and pulled a gun instead. It was a cold night, and the soldier struggled to wrap his fingers cleanly around the weapon — which gave Adrian the couple of seconds he needed. Adrian went into a crouch and propelled himself at the man, jumping as high as he could in order to make himself a more awkward target. As he flattened the soldier to the floor, the gun went off but the bullet flew harmlessly over Adrian's shoulder. Adrian swiped the gun from the man's hand and it landed a few metres away, where it was picked up by one of the soldier's pursuers. They looked on as their quarry struggled with the strange creature, refraining from getting involved. Which was how Adrian wanted it. He could handle this on his own.

As the soldier was now defenceless, and it should have been perfectly obvious to anybody that Adrian was far, far stronger than he was, the reasonable expectation was that he would surrender. Any further struggle was liable to cause serious injuries. Yet the soldier appeared less concerned with protecting his own safety and more concerned with keeping hold of

the metal box. He wrapped his body around it and cried out like a child whose favourite toy was being taken away. Adrian finally resolved the situation by placing a hand over the soldier's mouth and nose. The man was only willing to use one of his own hands in the attempt to get Adrian's hand away — the other must be clamped tightly to the box — and the attempt was unsuccessful. As the soldier became weak through lack of oxygen, he released the box. Adrian let him go, he slumped back and was grabbed by the men who'd chased him from the village.

Adrian cautiously flipped the box open, but found what he was expecting to find: nothing. The box was heavy, its sides were thick and lined with some kind of black material, and it was empty. Adrian flipped it closed, stood and made for the burning house.

The voice of the fire was less friendly than before.

+I told you not to mess it up+ the fire said.

+You know what I've been up to, then+ Adrian replied, forming the words inside his head then pushing them back at the voice. Nobody had seen Adrian enter the house, and he was doing his best to remain unseen. He was the only one in here. The metal box sat closed at his feet. This house was great fodder for the fire: it was the home of a carpenter, and Adrian was standing in his shop, surrounded by burning coffins. The efforts of the locals to extinguish the blaze intruded on his concentration, but Adrian kept his mind focused on the voice.

+Of course I know+ said the voice. +I can see inside your mind. I was afraid you might try something like this.+

+Who are you? Where are you from?+

+The future. Like you. But further into the future, I think.+

+You're stranded, like me. That's why we're both going to the same place.+

+Of course. You have your way of surviving whilst we go there, and I have mine.+

+You're controlling the soldiers, yeah?+

+Yes.+

+And using them to help you burn down buildings. Killing people. What for?+

+I'm not particularly interested in killing people. I don't much care for the taste of meat, actually. But if they get in the way...+

+Taste? This is how you feed?+

+You thought I did it for fun?+

+I've never really thought about why a fire does anything.+

+I just needed to eat. Like you. And as I say, we've both done well out of it — but you need me, and I don't need you. So if you won't stand aside and let me go on...+

+No. You're going to stop this.+

+Right. Oh dear. I'm afraid you leave me no choice...+

Adrian braced himself at those words, and within seconds he felt the heat of the flames becoming more intense. The fire blazed at him as if driven by bellows from all sides — but the fire had underestimated Adrian's fortitude. As Adrian held his arms in front of his face and what little fur remained was scorched away, the skin beneath held firm.

Adrian held his breath and ran from the building through curtains of fire, plunging out through the front door and rolling through the grass outside to ensure he wasn't alight anywhere. The firefighters jumped back in surprise. Adrian stood to find them all staring at him, which was not the most productive thing they could be doing — so he spurred them back into action by picking up a discarded bucket and looking for water to fill it with. Once they realised his aim was the same as theirs, the extinguishing effort resumed.

And the effort was much needed. As the blaze continued, Adrian could see the townspeople's frustration with how stubborn the fire was proving. Yet only Adrian knew just why this was. The fire knew that it was losing, and that this was its last throw of the dice. It raged against the dying of its own light. Yet this effort only made the house burn faster, and left the fire with nothing to feed on. The firefighters did an effective job of preventing it from spreading, and the best it could do was leap onto patches of grass, which were damp and entirely failed to catch.

When the fire was at a low ebb, the townspeople entered the building to see what could be salvaged. Adrian came with them, and heard the voice of the fire inside his head once more. Its tone was now very different. It pleaded desperately with him for mercy and rescue. Adrian didn't tell the fire that this had been his plan all along, that he wouldn't have destroyed a sentient being, even one who had selfishly razed people's lives to the ground. Instead he found the metal box, quietly brought it to a corner where the flames still flickered, opened the box and allowed the fire to jump inside. Then he shut the box and walked from the ruined building.

Adrian made a polite request for food, which was granted. Whilst he sat on the grass and ate, he saw the soldiers he'd tied up being carried past by the townspeople. The men were dead. The fire had lost its grip on them.

Adrian picked up the metal box and left. Jaca was not far away.

The fire did not speak throughout the rest of the journey, but Adrian could feel its presence in his head. It was trying to find out what he intended to do with it. It could simply have asked, because Adrian didn't wish to make any secret of it: he intended to send it back to its own time, with a request that its crimes be dealt with by the appropriate authorities on Earth. The humanity of this era were not equipped to deal with such a case, but those in the future would, and this seemed to him the fairest way.

Adrian arrived at Jaca almost a full day early, and sat under a tree on a hill overlooking the town. He watched the sun rise before he slept, his hands clasped tightly around the metal box; as he awoke, the sun was setting.

The town was lively, and Adrian spent a few pleasant hours watching its lights and hearing its noise.

When at last it became quieter, to a point where hopefully anyone who saw him would put it down to having drunk too much, Adrian walked to the rendezvous point — a park on the edge of the town. He was in plenty of time. He found a stone bench at the edge of a plaza and sat down, placing the metal box by his side.

After twenty or so minutes of waiting, and wondering whether he'd got the right date and time, and looking at the map to make sure he'd got the right place, Adrian saw Lucinda approaching from quite a distance. They kept their eyes on each other as she approached: when she was a few paces away, she finally broke into a smile.

'You made it, then,' she said, and looked him up and down. Adrian was well aware that he looked a state; his clothes were supposed to be self-cleaning, but the journey had tested their capacity for this to the absolute limit. The constant movement, plus the bouts of firefighting, had worn them thin. Above all, since Lucinda had last seen him, his fur had been scorched over most of his body, leaving him with several bald patches. It would take a few weeks for that to grow back to normal.

'Just about,' said Adrian.

Lucinda's gaze fell upon the metal box. She smiled again, then looked back to Adrian. 'Well, we have a little time to wait before Conchita gets here. Why don't I sit down and you can tell me all about it?'

This was what they did. Lucinda sat down so that the metal box was between them, and Adrian explained the sequence of events that had led to his acquiring it — which was also the story of his journey, but from the way Lucinda had looked at the box, he sensed it was also the element which she was principally interested in. She seemed impressed by his feats, but not surprised by the situation he had found himself in. He asked if she had encountered such creatures before.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'We call them the Incen. Generally they don't cause trouble, but if they're trapped outside their normal environment, they can get desperate and start to act up...'

'Act up?' said Adrian. 'It killed people. Destroyed homes.'

Lucinda smiled. 'Quite right. Sorry. Bad choice of words.'

The discussion ended at this point when a peculiar vehicle moved into view, heading for the centre of the plaza. It looked very much as if it belonged in a fairground: a brightly-coloured road transport in the shape of a steam engine and carriage, which seemed like it should have its own musical accompaniment. However, it made remarkably little noise beyond the odd creak and squeak. Adrian couldn't see how it was propelled: it moved more smoothly than the ambulance he'd followed across half of France.

Given that the time was precisely 3am, it was obvious that this was what they were waiting for.

At the rear of the 'engine', where the driver's cabin would be, a hatch opened and a small woman got out. Dark-haired, olive-skinned and dressed in well-cut gentleman's formal wear, she looked to be in her early twenties. Adrian supposed that this was Conchita. She closed the hatch behind herself, locked it and stepped over to the bench. Lucinda stood and shook her by the hand.

`Good to see you,' said Lucinda.

`How did it go?' Conchita asked. She spoke with a Spanish accent.

Lucinda tilted her hand from side to side in a `so-so' gesture. 'Got the job done. Could've been a lot cleaner though. I won't be able to go back *there* for a decade or two, more's the pity.'

Conchita turned to look at Adrian. 'Is this the gentleman you mentioned?'

`Yes,' said Lucinda. 'This is Adrian Wall.'

`Good evening,' said Adrian.

Conchita smiled and nodded.

`Lucinda said you could help me get back to my own time?'

`Of course,' she said. 'I would never leave a good man stranded. Would you like me to pick up the others along the way?'

`Others?' Adrian asked wearily.

Conchita smiled. 'When Lucinda told me about you I checked for related disruption, just in case there was a temporal disturbance to steer clear of. Thankfully your abrupt arrival didn't do any major damage, but I did find two parallel impacts to yours, both on the other side of what is contemporarily known as the English Channel, both within a couple of years of you. Friends of yours?'

Of course, thought Adrian. Benny and Peter were brought back too.

`Not friends, family,' he said simply. 'If it's not too much trouble, could we...?'

Conchita nodded. 'Of course.' Then she looked down at the metal box.

`Oh yeah,' said Adrian. 'About that. There's something in there who I think wanted to get a lift with you an' all. But he's been a bit of a naughty boy...'

`Yes,' sighed Conchita, 'I was afraid it might.' She picked up the metal box and turned back towards her vehicle, indicating that Adrian and Lucinda should follow.

Lucinda leaned in to Adrian. 'Wonderful machine, this.'

Adrian pointed at it. 'Then this is the time machine?'

`Oh yes.'

Conchita put the metal box down and opened another hatch in the engine, this time a long one running along the side. Behind the hatch was an intricate jumble of technology: at its centre was a large brass egg-shaped object, with two shutters on the front. Conchita opened the shutters, picked up a small brush and swept a pile of ash out from inside the brass egg. Then she went back to the driver's cabin and returned with

a sack. From this sack she produced lumps of what looked very much like coal, and placed them in the egg.

'It's coal-powered?' said Adrian.

Not coal,' said Conchita. Tut it burns.'

'What, and you can travel in time off that?'

Conchita nodded. 'If you have the right kind of flame.'

She bent down, picked up the metal box and opened it. The fire inside hopped from the box to the egg, and the fuel immediately caught light. A blue-green blaze roared inside the egg. Conchita shut the shutters and lowered the hatch.

'Thank you for helping to bring it back,' she said to Adrian.

'I didn't know that was what I was doing,' said Adrian.

'Sorry,' said Lucinda. 'I couldn't let you know that was what you were doing, because then it would've known that was what you were doing, you see. It was doing a little job for me in Paris, but then it went rogue. I realised it was planning to come back and take Conchita's machine for itself. So I put you on its trail. Stroke of luck you came along when you did.'

'I don't believe in luck,' said Adrian.

'I need to find a replacement,' said Conchita, slapping the side of the engine. 'This one's always going off the rails. Anyway. When are you going?'

Adrian sighed. There was no point feeling bitter. At least now he owed these women nothing for their help. He didn't like being in people's debt. `2609:

Conchita nodded. 'Short haul.' She pointed at the carriage. 'Climb aboard.'

Conchita climbed into the driver's cab whilst Lucinda opened a door in the carriage. 'After you,' she said and allowed Adrian to climb inside, then followed him.

The interior of the carriage was cluttered, filled with boxes and books. A curtain divided the front from the rear. 'Sit anywhere,' said Lucinda and reclined on a tattered green sofa. Adrian sat down in a handsome leather armchair and turned to look through the window.

The train creaked into motion, and started to perform tight circuits of the plaza at greater and greater speed. As the view through the window blurred, Adrian felt his memories of this time and place blurring too. Without the evidence of his burned and bruised body, he might be tempted to think that none of it had happened.



`...and that's how Adrian came to rescue us all. I really should learn to not underestimate him. Especially after...'

Bernice trailed off. There were now four skulls, but their voices had become virtually unified.

+There is another story?+

The expectant tone reminded her of Peter, and bedtimes passed. Bernice felt a smile pass across the corner of her mouth. Then she remembered where she was, and that she couldn't exactly tell her to turn the light out and go to sleep.

Turn the light out. Another thought began to push itself forwards, but she didn't want to address that little anecdote just yet. That one was far, far worse than any embarrassment.

The skulls looked expectant.

`OK, if you insist.' She pointed her trowel at them disapprovingly. 'But if you *ever* tell anyone about this...'



You Shouldn't Have

Cody Schell

A thousand wooden bowls. Under each bowl, a thousand wasps howling in anger. Holding each bowl down, two frightened children, their teeth chattering in fear that the wasps will escape. This is the sound made when the giant insect fell. Mortally wounded, its compound eyes flashed and twisted in their sockets. The gaping maw of the creature opened and released its dying breath in a cloud of smoke and fire. Fire stolen, no doubt, from the sacred Sun Flower.

No longer would this parasite nibble at the heavenly Flower's petals.

Larkspur's eyes were still rolled back into his head, his face orange with pollen. Petaldew gently pulled the sticky vine node out of his hands. Disconnected from the node, Larkspur's eyes fluttered shut while the shiny Silverleaf plants slowly returned to their normal positions. The intensely concentrated sunbeam dissipated. Random rainbows appeared momentarily in the air, refracting off to the horizon.

Once he was sure Larkspur was safe, Petaldew finally let it sink in. They had actually shot one of the great insects out of the sky! A genuine slaughter! The warriors in the neighbouring valley had claimed such a kill, but their trophy looked only like a particularly large Duskfly. This was larger. Much larger.

Holding out his thumbs, Petaldew tried to estimate its size. It was no exaggeration to imagine this monster could hold 100 men in its stomach. At that moment, something came crawling out of the beast's mouth. He drew his weapon. Was it a giant grub, or the creature's eggs? Petaldew was amazed to see a woman emerge. A woman escaping from the stomach of a Great Duskfly! He wondered how she became trapped there.

Benny stumbled out of the damaged shuttle and into the strange vegetation. Her fall burst delicate fungus pods, a cloud of fine dust filling her vision. She quickly realized the dust was actually a cloud of tiny mites. They crawled on her face, searching for any way inside. She fought to breathe.

Blinded, Benny frantically stood to run back to the ship, but felt something throw her to the ground. A liquid sprayed her face, coating her in something that smelled like pine and mango. Disoriented and unfamiliar with her environment, she wondered if she'd just been sprayed with the digestive acid of a carnivorous plant.

Almost instantly, the spray drove the bugs away. Fortunately, the liquid didn't seem to be acid. Excited male voices surrounded her. People helping her could be a good sign. She felt razor sharp stings at her ears; something was sliding painfully through the fleshy cartilage. Bad sign. She needed

Adrian's help but she didn't even know if he had escaped the fire in the shuttle.

The hands held her fast, preventing her from touching her mutilated ears. She hoped the dripping liquid on her shoulders wasn't her own blood. Suddenly a soft cloth wiped the pine/mango liquid off her face and out of her eyes.

Benny struggled to open her eyes, her eyelashes sticky and wet. Focusing on her surroundings, she wondered if she was hallucinating. She took a moment to think. Was she back at the Tchiki wedding reception? She hoped she hadn't drank that much, or the wrong thing. There were species-specific punchbowls, she remembered. The wedding she and Adrian were returning from was a cross-cultural wedding, and almost everyone in attendance was from a different planet. It was an odd sight to see half a dozen bridesmaids, each a different species, wearing matching dresses.

However, it was an even odder sight to see a dozen fierce-looking tribal warriors wearing ensembles that made those bridesmaids dresses almost gender neutral in comparison. It is a galactic constant that bridesmaids' dresses are hideously tacky, covered in gigantic faux flowers. These men looked like they were on the stag night from hell. Floral fabrics mixed with real flowers, sheer silks, puffy skirts, spaghetti straps. Was that war paint or makeup? Had she drunk from the wrong punchbowl?

The men were talking hurriedly to each other, and pointing flower-like guns at her. Or rather, pointing gun-like flowers. A man was holding a bloom that had a bulb-like reservoir, dripping with the pine/mango liquid. He pointed it at her and sprayed her face one last time.

'Oh,' said Benny, spitting the foul insect repellent out of her mouth. 'Flowers. You shouldn't have.'

The tribe all stared back at her, as tense and confused as her. Two or three of the 'bridesmaids' were checking her over, making sure they'd eliminated all the insects. It looked as if a shipment of fairy costumes had fallen out of a plane somewhere over the South Pacific.

'Look, give me a second to adjust, I'm not used to feeling like the underdressed one when I'm in a jungle. Are you the seven brothers or the seven...'

At that moment, Adrian burst out through the shuttle's hatch, coughing. It was a good thing he'd insisted on changing out of his rental tuxedo at the first possible moment. His durable construction gear had done a good job of protecting him from the cabin fire. His work boots and leather gloves were singed, but intact.

The tribe jumped up in surprise and trained pointed spears on him. Benny was sure this human-looking tribe wasn't going to respond well to Adrian's feral appearance. She could see it on their faces, surprise blending into confusion. Next it would be hate blending into... hysterical laughter? The tribesmen were exchanging glances, pointing at Adrian

(with their thumbs instead of their fingers, Benny noted), grinning wildly and openly laughing.

'Benny! Are you okay?' Adrian, ignoring the laughing tribe, started flipping his head from side to side, shooing insects away. He stopped when he noticed he was the source of their amusement. 'Whatsa matter? You never seen a Killoran before?' Getting no response he snarled at them, baring his fangs and taking an aggressive stance.

Wide-eyed silence followed. Then even more frantic laughter ensued. They were undaunted by his animal appearance. Benny wondered if there weren't predatory mammals on this planet. She couldn't see any sign of animal byproducts in their clothing. Everything was made from vegetation. Lots of silk, so obviously something like a silkworm existed in the very healthy insect population.

Petaldew stepped forward, lowering his weapon casually. 'You are the largest man we have ever seen...' he laughed, thumb-pointing at Adrian's features. 'A fearsome face, and the thickest body hair! You've even lost fingers in battle. You have the aspect of a warrior, but... why would such a man dress so... so...'. Petaldew, holding back his amusement, held his thumb up to indicate that Adrian should wait for the rest of his sentence. '...unmanly?!

Adrian was shocked. 'You think I'm... unmanly???' He pointed with his index finger. 'YOU... think I'm unmanly?'

Benny stepped in. 'Adrian, hold on. Let me use some of my anthropological training here.' Benny really wasn't feeling very patient after a crash landing, an insect attack and falling for the squirty-flower trick; all in about ten minutes of each other. She approached Petaldew and pointed with her thumb the same way she'd seen him pointing. That should impress them. 'So, let me put it to you another way. YOU think... HE... is unmanly??' More laughter.

Benny narrowed her eyes and studied Petaldew. This was obviously a culture with a gender inversion. In most species, it's the male that's the most colourful and ornate in order to attract a mate. In some ways, most humanoid societies were backward compared to this one. However, close-minded pigs are the same in any culture, judging quickly without understanding. Benny could see their distaste for anything they considered unmanly, feminine and therefore weak.

Behind her, she heard Adrian fussing. 'What are you doing? Get those flowers away from me! OUCH!' The tribesmen were pushing sharp thorny stems through Adrian's earlobes the same way they had done to Benny.

Larkspur stepped from behind Petaldew. 'Hear him whining!! The lobeblossoms keep the insects out of your ears... it drives them away. Unless you want eggs hatching in your brain, I'd leave them where they are.

Benny was tired of the belittling that was going on. She recognized macho bullshit no matter what planet she was on. 'That's enough. I know

your type. I don't care if you flounce around in flowers and sheer pink tutus, but you're one of the biggest bunch of muscle-bound jerks I've ever had the displeasure to come across! Just because Adrian isn't dressed like you doesn't mean he's a sissy.'

`Thanks Benny,' mumbled Adrian.

`Just because he's dressed differently than every sexist male on your planet doesn't mean he's effeminate.'

`Okay Benny...'

`Just because he, in your eyes, is a weakling powder-puff nelly, doesn't mean you have the right to judge him.'

`BENNY. You're not helping!' growled Adrian.

Petal dew stepped forward to speak, but Benny deliberately turned her back. She had enough of them and had to ask Adrian some questions first.

`Adrian, how is the damage to the... oh! You know, you really look quite sweet with those flowers on your ears like that!' Adrian glared, snorting through his nose like a bulldog who had just been tricked into taking a bath. 'It really brings out the colour in your...'

`THE POWER CELLS ARE DEAD BENNY!' thundered Adrian, but then he calmed himself. 'I had to jettison the charge to keep the overload from making them explode.'

`No power at all then? What about the reactor?'

`What reactor? You were the one who lectured Brax about the Collection's Thaesium Footprint.'

Benny recalled petitioning for experimenting with using more solar-wind fueled vehicles. A greener universe seemed like such a good idea when it wasn't so inconvenient.

`So? We just have to wait for the sun to charge the cells, right? How long could that take?'

`Benny, they're totally empty. Bone dry. Absorbing solar power in space is easy. On a planet with a protective atmosphere, it's painfully slow. It will take... months.'

`Ah. Well. Let's go with plan B then. Call for help.'

`Communications were the first thing to overload. They're fried. I can't figure out what happened up there.'

`We saved you,' interjected Petal dew.

Benny turned, tilted her head and gave Petal dew a pinched smile. 'Sorry?'

`We saved you. We didn't know we were saving you, but we redirected the Heavenly Flower's beams to burn the creature that swallowed you. Using the Silverleaf plants.' He pulled down the stems of one of the plants to show Benny the leaves. 'See, like a bright reflection in water? My brothers Larkspur and Dogwood are able to ask them to do this for us.'

`They ask the plants?' Bernice saw the one Petal dew indicated as Dogwood sitting cross-legged in front of a knot of vines. He was slapping his face with handfuls of orange pollen, rubbing it into his eyes and gums.

Bernice and Adrian watched in silence as Dogwood gripped the node. They both realized it was some sort of telepathic contact between man and plant. 'And Jason makes fun of me when I talk to my plants.'

'What plants?' snorted Adrian. 'They died of neglect.'

Petal dew was peering through the end of a long green tube with clear membranes that held successively larger pockets of water that acted as rough magnifying lenses. 'Go ahead Dogwood. Teasel is back. He placed an airpod directly on the nest and several close by. He's horribly stung. The rest of you tend to him while Dogwood detonates the airpods.'

Benny whispered to Dogwood's twin Larkspur. 'What are in the airpods?'

'The air that burns. We ask the plants to collect it for us in concentrated pods. Then we ask the Silverleaf plants to aim the sunbeams at a series of pods.'

'And the pods explode, destroying a nest of insects before they have a chance to escape? Brilliant! Adrian, could their beams have caused the shuttle's power overload?'

Adrian gingerly touched the wounds in his ears, feeling the thorns that held the lobeblossoms in place. 'Actually, since we were doing a survey in the atmosphere, our shielding would have been off, but the collectors would have still been wide open. You did say you just wanted to dip in and do a quick scan.'

'Another bright idea of mine.'

Dogwood tensed, every muscle twitching, sweat running roughly through the powdery pollen on his face. The stems of the towering plants tensed with him, wavering. Every Silverleaf in sight flicked into position in concentric circles, each angled just slightly differently, directing intensified solar light at a particular target about a kilometre away.

Benny had to admit she was impressed. 'It really is like a laser!' The distant airpods reached critical temperature and the oxygen rich pods exploded spectacularly. Benny could see something black and burning in the air, the remains of the deadly insects.

'The cause is the solution! Petal dew... all we need is for you to do that again, but aim at those black spots on our ship. Next to the melted communications array. Then we can leave!'

Petal dew shook his head. 'Ship? I don't understand. The giant insect is dead. We killed it to protect our god, the mighty Sun Flower, from his terrible jaws. We see many such creatures in the sky all the time, yet so distant they look like the tiniest of mites.'

Wishing to avoid a discussion about cosmology, Benny pointed to the shuttle. 'That's the thing, it's not a giant insect. It's our ship. A vessel.'

'I don't understand.'

At that moment, some seeds that had been thrown into the air by the explosion came floating through past on cottony parachutes. 'Like these seeds... we travel in it.'

`But the creature is dead!'

`It's not a creature, it's more like... a decoy! Built to fly like an insect, but it's not alive. In it, we can travel up among the... other insects.'

`I see! It is like camouflage. A deception to get closer to the insects and affect a kill? We do something similar, masking ourselves with scents to get close to hives. But how can your tribe build such things? This material is shiny like a beetle's shell, is it made from the remains of a great Duskfly?'

`So you understand! And you can help us?'

`We could... but we won't.'

Benny was immediately angry again. Why did she always have to end up on the planet of jerks? 'Why not? You can help us get the energy we need, and we can be out of your hair, or your... is that really a tiara made from beetle shells? Anyway, it's not like we're fond of each other, so why not help get rid of us?'

Petal dew considered Benny, the two of them sneering at each other. Then he started to grin. 'Uh-oh' thought Benny.

`I see your point. But, I'm not sure if you deserve our help.'

Inside Benny was seething. 'What would convince you, then?'

`The sun is setting. Spend one night with us. Let me observe you. See if I can trust you. Tomorrow morning, I will decide if you deserve our help or not. In the meantime, let's get to our camp and get this big one some more suitable clothing.'

`This isn't a joke. Hold still.' Neither Adrian nor Benny were in a very good mood. Despite retiring early, they had spent a mostly sleepless night in their strange sheer makeshift tent.

`Benny,' growled Adrian, 'Anthropology you said. Participant observation you said. I'm about to rip this thing off! I'm really uncomfortable.' Where the clothes felt comfortable, he felt even more uncomfortable.

Itchy thin vines held together delicate lavender fabrics. Lilacs traveled up a sheer strap over one of his shoulders. He shifted his considerably massive bulk from foot to foot. Benny reminded him to hold still, his toenails were still wet. He could feel thorns poking through his fur to the skin, not to mention the prickly flowers in his ears.

`Don't you dare. Once this skirt is in place, you'll be ready. Our being able to leave this place anytime soon depends upon you keeping it on.' Benny tried to ignore Adrian's almost constant growling, which had started to resemble a whimper. 'We need to gain their trust. Believe me, I'm just as fed up with this planet as you are.'

Taking a minute to straighten and flounce Adrian's tutu and make sure his wrist corsage was in place, she stretched up as far as she could and put the headgear in place. She dropped off her tippie-toes, satisfied the sparkling tiara made of glassy onyx insect-shells was secure between his floppy pointed ears. Benny thought Adrian looked like he was ready to perform in a Swan Lake-inspired retelling of Little Red Riding Hood.

Instead of Grandma, the wolf ate a ballerina and squeezed himself into her clothes. But she couldn't even bring herself to smirk at the sight. He was about to fight for their lives, their freedom and any chance of seeing their son any time soon.

'Why are they called Duskflies if they attack at dawn?'

'I don't know Adrian, but you need to impress the tribe this morning. I'm hoping this will convince them to help us. Here's a water container. They gathered some from the condensation on the leaves.'

'HEY!' Adrian was horrified to see the container was made from sections of his jacket stitched together to make a watertight pouch. 'Tell me they didn't do this to all my clothes.'

'First rule of cross-cultural exchange: bartering. Sorry, Adrian.'

Petal dew poked his head into the sheer tent and looked Adrian up and down. 'Much better. I take it you're planning on helping this morning, Adrian?'

Adrian raised a carved weapon. 'Ready or not, here I come.'

Benny was taking mental notes. The tribe had the process down to a science. Every day at dawn for a few weeks of this season, the not-yet mature Duskflies would emerge from their nesting places and swarm across the valley. They would consume as much as they could before the sun fully rose, then return to hiding from the heat of the sun. In their immature state, they could only swarm between the chill of the night and the heat of the day.

The swarm would normally be harmless to people, were the people not protecting their food supply. The changing of season was a difficult time to find food. Every year at this time, certain tribe members left the main settlement and camped here to more easily protect the developing fruit.

The tribe protected what they could in the morning, then spent the day hunting down nests, and coordinating their destruction. Not quite agricultural subsistence, noted Benny, but on their way to it. They weren't planting and cultivating the fruit, but they were protecting selected areas.

The tribe seemed to have a natural telepathic talent, with the assistance of the orange pollen that facilitates the connection. It seemed that they'd been able to selectively breed plants into useful forms this way, even if they weren't creating fields and orchards yet. Perhaps this was a new talent they'd discovered? It was only the constant insect threat that prevented them from turning this into a full-blown technology. At the same time, it was that same threat that pushed them to develop new breeds of useful plants.

A number of men were hard at work preparing the insect repellent spray-bulbs. Others hung the tent walls up as nets in a rough semi-circle. Adrian was unsure of what he should be doing, but his help was gracefully accepted by the tribesmen, many of whom apologised for laughing at him the day before. That was a promising sign.

'Bernice, I have a job for you.' Petaldew handed to her what looked like giant walnuts. 'The men are going to need to eat these after the swarm passes. Make sure they're ready.' Benny couldn't believe he was asking her to make breakfast just because she was the only woman there!

Benny was about to tell him where to stuff his nuts when a distant buzzing filled the air. The warmth of the sun was waking the Duskflies and they were starting to stir, desperate to eat whatever they could before the sun was high enough to burn their immature bodies.

Petaldew called 'This is it! Set up the defences at the gap in the nets!' Adrian joined the men, towering over them, but he mimicked the way they brandished their weapons. Men high in the trees started spraying the repellent mist slowly in regular intervals, which filled the entire area with that pine/mango scent.

Benny scoffed, ignoring the nuts for now. She'd do what was asked of her against her better judgment, just to get on Petaldew's good side. However, she wanted to watch the attack. She made eye contact with Adrian who was some distance away from her. He gave her an awkward wave of his paw.

A shadow formed over the rising sun. A cloud of insects rose out of the morning mist, approaching ever closer. Benny could see why the tribe had their beliefs about the sun and the insects attacking it. The movement in the sky was frightening and the growing sound turned her stomach slightly. It was the angriest noise she could imagine; a mindless insect rage.

The majority of the dark cloud parted and lifted around the tribe's defences and continued on, diverted away from the fruits. However, a steady stream was still able to sneak through every crack in the tribe's defences.

These weren't just flies. They were the size of shrimp! Flying shrimp with wings and stingers! Their soft bodies were easy to hit and stab, but the dangerous stingers were terrifying. Adrian and the few dozen tribesmen on the ground did their best to strike them as they came through, but invariably, a few would get through and someone would get stung.

Benny watched helplessly. She should be there with them, not sitting here trying to crack nuts. Once she saw the tribe seemed to have things in hand, she relaxed a little and tried to concentrate on her task.

One of the tribesmen in the tree started screaming, holding his eye. He fell to the ground, knocking down a section of netting in the process. The defences were severely weakened and the amount of Duskflies getting through was growing exponentially. Everyone was getting stung with increasing frequency, including Adrian. Bernice swore.

Fortunately most of the swarm had already passed, and Petaldew ordered everyone to lie flat on the ground and just let the rest of the insects go through. They'd diverted most of the creatures, so the fruit wouldn't be damaged much by what remained of the horde. The men, on the

other hand, could be significantly hurt if they didn't simply get out of the way.

Petaldew screamed 'Why aren't those nuts ready? The men need them to battle the toxins from the stings!'

Benny jumped up and grabbed them. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know!' She fumbled with the nuts, scanning the tall grass for Adrian's face. All the men were flat on the ground, waiting as the last of the Duskflies passed. Petaldew showed Benny how to separate the two halves of the nuts, inserting his wooden blade into a ridge in the shell and twisting at a point near the end. She ran pieces out to the men who needed them, including Adrian who had one bad sting on his shoulder blade.

'Bernice, why didn't you do your part?'

'I'm sorry! I thought it was more macho bullshit from you, expecting me to prepare meals just because I'm a woman. Food preparation, that's women's work, isn't it. It's all a weak woman can handle, right?'

'I don't understand your anger, Bernice. That is challenging work. I gave it to you because it's hard, not because it's simple. I wanted to see how you handled it. I wasn't impressed. And I don't understand why you think feminine equals weakness.'

'Why I think that? When you first saw Adrian, you said he was unmanly!'

'Yes, unmanly, like a child is not like a man. Dressed in such protective clothing as if he is afraid of the world. As if he is an untested warrior who can't defend himself. Our culture believes women are strong equals. In fact, this job is done by all women every other season. Children are but those who have not yet reached the height of their strength.'

'Oh. So... Oh.' Adrian was at Benny's side, concerned about the confrontation. 'It's okay, Adrian.'

Petaldew thought for a moment. 'Let me show you something, Bernice. It's nearby.'

After a minute or two through the greenery, Petaldew, Benny and Adrian reached a clearing. A few of the men who weren't hurt or were already recovered followed as well.

Petaldew lowered his voice upon entering the clearing. 'What is your life like where you are from Benny? Do you have a tribe? Do you have a family?'

'I have a young son. One I'd very much like to see tomorrow and not in months.' Benny pulled out a disc from her pocket. The device held a recording of Peter singing a song just before she left him with Jason. She wasn't sure what song it was, but it was off-key and adorable. She played it for Petaldew, who was startled and amazed.

Then something strange happened. Benny heard Peter singing again somewhere else in the clearing. She looked around, and saw the area was filled with short flowers with oval shaped pods. Inside each pod there were

fine yellow filaments. In one of the pods, the filaments were vibrating, playing back an echo of Peter's song.

Adrian perked up his pointed ears as another bulb gave a tiny echo, just as the first faded away. A repetition of his son's innocent song. His head jerked when he heard another, further away, in a slightly different tone. Travelling from pod to pod, the repeated fragment became its own song. A few well placed thumps to one of the warriors' water skins, and the tune had a steady beat. A song featuring Peter singing; so clear and vibrating with an increasing energy.

Benny felt goose bumps run up her arms and in the small of her back. Suddenly, she missed Peter even more horribly than before. But it was beautiful. She smiled, tears welling in her eyes and simultaneously sobbed and giggled. Whimsically, her sobgiggle joined the chorus, repeated in smatterings through the clearing.

She clamped her hands in a 'V' over her mouth, crying silently, smiling. Crying out loud would ruin the delicate music. This song somehow expressed perfectly her love for Peter at the same time reflecting and amplifying the emotion.

Petaldew whispered to Benny. 'Life is hard here, Bernice... Benny. But we can't ever let it stop being beautiful. Our ways are not, as you say, macho bullshit. Our ways strive to maintain the vulnerability of life.' He thumb-pointed at the field of vibrating pods. 'We are echoes that last fleetingly.'

He put his hand on Adrian's shoulder, just above a pink lily. 'It isn't being weak that we were laughing at... it's the fear of facing that weakness. Putting up barriers at every point before you know you need them. That is the way of the adult Duskflies. Like all insects, their hard outer shell is protective, but is never removed. It only serves to protect the mindless evil, hate and greed trapped inside. To live in such fear, that is the greatest weakness.'

'We value our vulnerabilities because it leaves us open to life, and to wonders. Life that can be so easily taken away...' He plucked one of the echoing pods. 'The brief, fragile nature of life is what makes it sweet.' He handed the flower to Benny.

Benny held the flower, almost afraid to look up at Petaldew. 'Listen... what I said about men being all the same... I judged you too quickly.' She took a deep breath. 'I judged you unfairly. And I... I...'

'...you shouldn't have.' murmured Petaldew. The sound in the pod in Benny's hand echoed away forever.

Benny didn't have a sarcastic quip to counter him with. Well, she did. Something about that's the reason she's an archaeologist, not an anthropologist, but she pushed it out of her mind.

The song was fading now, replaced with Petaldew's words echoing the grove as well as inside her head. She gazed at the pod in her hand. It was so sad to see it plucked, but so nice to be able to hold it and see it up close. She tried to commit its every symmetry to memory.

Petaldew looked at everyone in their little group. 'We are not so different. Men and women... and Adrian.' Adrian growled and everyone laughed, the intensity of the moment broken.

The lingering pod-song— made of men, women, laughter and growling— was charming, but discordant. And had a strange resonance. A background buzzing that increased.

Benny pushed the delicate pod into Petaldew's hands, accidentally smashing it. 'That noise! It's the Duskflies! It's another attack!'

'No Benny... it's your craft. On the far edge of the podfield. Dogwood has been directing light to the point you indicated since first light. I never meant to keep you here, I simply wanted you to see how we live.

'The buzzing is your ship ready to take you home.'

'We just barely made orbit. The solar wind is steadily recharging the cells. I'm getting out of this get-up, Benny.'

'Take your time, I'm just going to quickly jot down some notes for a paper I once abandoned. This experience might be the key to a long unsolved anthropological puzzle. Did I ever tell you about the ridiculous false eyelashes worn by the...'

'No way, Benny! You are not to tell a living soul about this!! You promised.'

Benny grinned but then pulled a face. 'Oh, fine, I'll leave out some of the more embarrassing details. Like me' — she pointed at herself with her thumb — 'making a complete mess of anthropological observation for one thing.'

'Well, I'm going to go get out of this... this... This.' Adrian shook his head as he disappeared into the next section of the shuttle. Benny didn't have the heart to tell him everything in the cargo compartment had burned to bits in the crash, including their luggage. Not even a washcloth survived. Adrian was going to have to stay in his pink tutu all the way home.



'Never,' Bernice reiterated. 'Never repeat that. Not to anyone.'

The skulls didn't answer.

The trenches of her dig were quite deep now, and she felt she was getting to the bottom of the grave. Having become accustomed to the psychic presence of the skulls, she could instinctively feel that there was only one left to uncover. A little more digging, and it would be done.

It wasn't the most elegant job she'd ever done. Around the edge of the dig, her findings were piled haphazardly — a pile of bones, a pile of rusted equipment, and then the skulls themselves, all lined up in a row.

It was a strange life to live. Bernice felt a little woozy, a pressure behind her eyes. She wondered how late it was. Probably the early hours of the morning.

She needed to keep going. To keep talking, for the benefit of both herself as well as her audience.

'Anyway,' she said, straightening up from her digging, and flexing her spine a little to shake out a growing ache. 'Before I got sidetracked, I was telling you about how that stupid machine had stranded us in time. I landed on my feet, and amongst friends. Adrian had a bad time of it, but he's a big boy, he can cope. But Peter...'

She trailed off.

'Well, with Peter, I'm not sure I ever got the whole story. I can tell you the basics, but what adolescent boy tells his mother everything? You'd need to get inside his head to find that out.'



The Illuminated Man

Mark Michalowski

Simeon found Dog Boy Peter (and it was always Dog Boy Peter — never Peter the Dog Boy or Peter the Dog — or even just Peter Dog) asleep under a magnificent rhododendron bush at the edge of Clapham Common, just a few hundred yards from where Colonel Scarlet's Circus of the Bizarre had pitched its tents. He was curled up like a baby, his knees tucked under his arms, his mouth a thin, anguished line. In the oily light from the gas lamps that ringed the park, Simeon could see that something wasn't quite right with the boy's features: his nose was snub and dark, like that of a dog and his eyelashes and eyebrows were thick. Something trembled inside Simeon's chest as he pulled back the branches of the bush to get a closer look. A drop of rain fell onto the boy's face and his eyes snapped open.

For one long, terrified moment, the boy stared into Simeon's face and his lips parted ever so slightly and he *growled*....

'Where are you from, Dog Boy Peter?'

Coming from Delphine, the words had none of the sting that they had when Simeon or Carl said them. In fact, thought Peter, as he watched her comb her pale fingers through the candyfloss fuzz of bronze hair, lit up by the autumn evening sunshine, he could almost come to like being called 'Dog Boy' by her. He wasn't quite sure whether she'd feel the same about being called 'Mermaid Girl'.

'You'd think I was mad if I told you.'

'Who is to say I don't think you're mad anyway? Maybe I'd think you were less mad.'

Peter gave a chuckle.

'I doubt it.'

'Why do you not try me?'

Delphine tipped her head on one side and the sunlight caught her cheekbones, fragile as porcelain and pale as milk. The perfection was at such odds with her lower body that Peter couldn't help but let his eyes flicker downwards to the lace wrap she wore around her waist, hiding the legs that had been fused together since birth. When, once again, he caught her eye, there was a quizzical smile there.

'You are going to say to me that you are from a place where there are people like me everywhere, are you not? That your world is inhabited by freaks like — what?' She paused, catching his expression at the word 'freaks'. 'You do not like that word, no?'

'You're not a freak,' Peter shook his head.

Delphine laughed and stuck out the tip of her tongue.

'We are all freaks in this world, Dog Boy Peter. Maybe not on the outside...' She touched her breastbone with her bunched fingers. 'But in here.... Yes.'

'Don't say that.'

'Why not?' She did that shruggy thing with her face and Peter smiled. 'It is the truth.' She glanced round. 'You see Colonel Scarlet over there? You think he is not a freak, yes?'

Peter didn't know where this was going.

'Topper tells me that he loves boys,' she whispered, leaning close. 'Not the young baby boys but the pretty ones.'

'I'm safe then,' Peter said with a grin.

His face switched from smile to frown in an instant.

'Why you say that about yourself? You are very pretty, Dog Boy Peter.' She reached up and touched his nose and her smile blossomed again.

'And the twins,' she continued. 'They had a friend — a man friend — who lived in their caravan and who never came out.'

This was news to Peter.

'Never?'

'Never — because he was not real. He was, how you say, an imagining friend.'

'Imaginary.'

Delphine nodded.

'And Titan —'

'OK, OK, I get it,' he said with soft resignation. 'We're all freaks really.'

'See!' Delphine laughed. 'You are not so stupid either, Dog Boy Peter. This world you come from that you will not speak of — it is not so different to this one, non?'

'Oh, it's very different, believe me.'

'There are people there, yes?'

Peter nodded.

'Then,' she said with a crisp finality, pulling her shawl around her shoulders, 'it is not so different. If there are people there like you, then it is a good place. And if there are differences — well, vive le difference!'

Peter laughed.

'Vive le difference!'

'Maybe one day you will take me there? Would I like it? Is it a happy place? Are there people there who miss you? You spoke of your mother, Bernice. She will be missing you, yes?'

'I hope so,' said Peter.

'Then why do you not go back?'

'Because I don't know how to.'

'You should speak to Simeon — he knows many things. He is a wise man, I think. Not always a nice man, but a wise one. Perhaps he will know how you can go home.'

Peter's distaste for the man must have shown in his face.

`I'd rather not.'

`You do not have to like him to listen to him.'

`No, but I have to trust him to believe him.'

`And you do not?'

Peter narrowed his eyes.

`There's something about him — haven't you noticed it? When the twins or Ilia come up in conversation, haven't you noticed...?' Peter broke off. Of course Delphine hadn't noticed: only Peter noticed how Simeon's smell changed subtly, how his breathing altered.

`Haven't I noticed what?'

`It doesn't matter.'

`No, tell me!'

Delphine glanced around and leaned closer.

`What is it?'

`He's hiding something, I know he is.'

`You think he knows what happened to them — to the twins and to Ilia?'

`I'm sure of it.'

`You still do not believe that they just chose to leave, do you?' She gave a little shake of her head. 'Then we should say something to Colonel Scarlet.'

`Why did they leave in the middle of the night without telling anyone? I can't believe they'd do that. And say what to the Colonel?'

Delphine shrugged again.

`Tell him....' Her voice tailed off and she made birdlike flapping motions with her hands.

`Yeah,' said Peter. 'Exactly. And the Colonel would just think I was making trouble for Simeon and he'd kick me out. And then what?'

`He would not — he's a good man, really.'

`Delphine, I've been here for less than two weeks — Simeon's been here, what, a year? He does most of the work, he knows how to get the most out of the other... performers.' Peter almost used the f-word and caught Delphine's smile. 'If anyone's gonna go, it's going to be me, trust me on that one.'

`Well then,' Delphine said, 'there's nothing to be done, is there?' She sat back and adjusted her crutches across her lap.

Peter winked.

`Isn't there?'

`What are we doing?' whispered Delphine, leaning against the side of Simeon's caravan and shifting her weight onto her other crutch.

`We're looking for evidence that Simeon's involved with the disappearances.'

`I know what we are *doing*; what I mean is "What are we doing?"' If we are caught, Scarlet will throw us out. And then what will we do? Who is going to want us?'

'We'll get a job in a pizza place,' he laughed, reaching through the narrow gap in the door to dislodge the latch. 'You can work behind the counter and I'll get a job delivering them on a bike. Your legs'll be hidden and so will my —'

'A what?'

Peter shook his head.

'Doesn't matter — ah-ha!'

This last exclamation coincided with the door to Simeon's caravan swinging silently open.

'Remember,' he said, starting up the steps and glancing round. 'If anyone sees you, you're waiting for me, and I'm looking for Simeon, yeah?'

Delphine nodded.

Peter's eyes — always much better than those around him at acclimatising to the dark — quickly adjusted. He wrinkled his nose: sweat, piss, food, bad breath, smoke.... All those things that, to Peter, were as much a part of people around him as their faces and voices. But here they were magnified five-fold. How did people used to live like this, he wondered, as the door swung to with a gentle click behind him? He always thought it ironic that humans often thought of Killorans as dirty and hairy and grubby, when the truth was actually that, because of their heightened sense of smell, they bathed two or three times a day. It was humans that stank!

He concentrated on his job: Simeon — or anyone — could be along at any minute.

The caravan was surprisingly luxurious. Peter had imagined that it would be rough and Spartan with little room for comforts. But the cushions on the seats around the table were upholstered in delicate cream and green patchwork, and a large, crocheted throw in dark green was folded neatly across the bed. Thin bars of light slanted in through the shutters.

Peter looked round, realising that he had no idea what he was looking for: he'd somehow expected that whatever Simeon's secret was, there'd be a whopping great clue to it sitting on the table, flashing.

Quickly, he opened a cupboard — pots, pans, glasses. And another. Clothes — three white shirts, a couple of jackets. Underwear thrown carelessly in the bottom. Boots.

Peter closed the door and reached for the red-lacquered handle of the next cupboard along — and let out a yelp as a spark stung his finger. He looked round quickly in case anyone had heard, but the door remained shut. If Delphine hadn't heard it, it was unlikely anyone else had.

Gingerly, he started reaching for the door handle again before thinking better of it and grabbing a small, grey towel from the tabletop. This time, his hand firmly wrapped in it, there was no shock. He pulled open the door, leaning as far back as he could in case there were something inside, ready to jump out at him.

He had to *open* the other door to the cupboard to let enough light in to see what was there: four or five shelves with an assortment of bric-a-brac and odds and ends. Books. Small metal tins. Two chipped vases. More books. A small pile of handkerchiefs... Peter's eyes scanned the shelves, looking for something odd, something that, his tingling skin told him, had to be here. The same something that had leaped, through the spark, into him, from the cupboard handle. Something that almost seemed like it wanted to be found.

Peter turned suddenly at the sound of a whispered voice, but there was no one there. Apart from the whisper.

+Kindred+

It wasn't the *word* that the voice whispered in Peter's head. It was the concept. He blanched, simultaneously scared and intrigued. In fact it was so nebulous that he wasn't at all sure that he hadn't simply imagined it.

`What?' he mouthed silently.

+Alike+ came the idea. +Us,+

Peter's eyes continued to scan down the shelves, but this time they felt as though they were being led, drawn inexorably to...

A jar.

A small, glass jar, not much thicker than a large fist and perhaps twice as high. It was filled with brownish-grey fluid, strands of something slimy pooling in the bottom. Other than that, it was empty.

The voice nodded in the back of Peter's head as he found himself reaching for the jar. But he stopped, just inches from it, his hand still outstretched. He realised that it wasn't the empty jar that was whispering in his head but an echo of it, something that had once been in the jar, something that had left its imprint on it.

`Who are you?' Peter said quietly.

Suddenly, without warning, Peter felt dreadfully alone. A sickening, heart-thumping aloneness, as though someone had just turned off the world.

`That's not who you are,' said Peter, firmly, fighting down the panic.

`That's what you are.'

The aloneness — not loneliness — washed over Peter again and he swayed on his feet, steadying himself on the edge of the shelf.

+We are the same.+

It was like a slap to his face. He pulled back sharply, clenching his outstretched hand into a fist, readied it, prepared to smash it into the jar, into its tiny, whispering, lying voice. Every muscle was strained, tensed, like he was on a rack, slowly being drawn out into a mile-long sinew, vibrating with energy.

+Together+ came the response, almost gentle.

Peter's fist relaxed and opened and he found his hand drifting, almost of its own volition, back towards the jar.

`What the fuck are you doing in here, Dog Boy?'

Peter spun on his heel, arm still outstretched. Silhouetted in the doorway, hands gripping the frame, was Simeon.

Behind him, just visible in the evening light, Delphine wobbled backwards and forwards on her crutches, her face scrunched up in distress as she tried to see past the tattooed man and into the caravan.

'Your girlfriend out there,' sneered Simeon with a jerk of the head. 'Says you're looking for me. Expected me to be in that cupboard, did you?'

His voice was cold and glittery in the stuffy silence of the caravan.

Peter's heart thumped in his chest — a strange, unnatural cadence, almost as if there were two hearts in there, trying unsuccessfully to beat in time. Again, his sense of smell felt boosted; it was almost as if he could see Simeon's breath, curling out from him like ectoplasm.

What's happening to me? he thought.

'Dog got your tongue?'

Simeon's words jabbed at Peter like the tip of a knife, pressing against his ribs.

'You know what happened to the twins, don't you?' Peter said suddenly.

'And you thought they'd be in there, did you, Dog Boy? Thought I'd chopped 'em up and put them in jars, did you? Well...' Simeon flashed nicotine-stained teeth. 'Any sign of them?'

'You know what happened to them, though, don't you?' Peter repeated.

'How would I know? They vanished in the middle of the night —'

'Just like Ilia and Pinhead did.'

'Just like Ilia and Pinhead did.'

Man and boy faced off against each other, silently — until the spell was broken by Delphine, calling from outside. Simeon turned, and Peter thought he saw something on the back of the man's neck, curling up from the frayed collar into his hair.

'Colonel Scarlet wants to see everyone,' she shouted to Peter and Simeon. 'Before supper.'

Simeon turned back to Peter and their eyes locked again.

'Wonder what that's all about...' he said, another irritating smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

'Maybe someone's found the twins.'

Simeon gave the barest of shrugs with his face — and then moved aside to let Peter out. As they passed, he grabbed Peter's upper arm. Not quite enough to hurt, but enough to let Peter know that Simeon wasn't happy. Peter looked down at Simeon's hand. On the back, the wide open, fanged mouth of a cobra gaped at him.

And in the twilight gloom of the caravan, its tongue flicked backwards and forwards across Simeon's knuckles...

They gathered around the fire — Colonel Scarlet, resplendent in his red coat and black trousers; Delphine, swaddled in a blanket, her crutches on the

grass at her side; Topper in his leather strong-man's outfit, shifting edgily on the too-tiny stool that Peter feared would collapse under the man's immense weight. Others arrived as they waited in silence.

Peter sat down between Delphine and Madame Horchata who made tutting, apocalyptic noises as if she was foretelling the end of the world.

'People!' began the Colonel once they were all assembled, clapping his hands theatrically like he was addressing a paying audience. 'Friends! A good show tonight — well done to all of you!'

'Then break out the rum!' called Topper with a grin. There was a chorus of laughs and agreements, but the Colonel clapped his hands again.

later, later my friends. Plenty of that later! I wanted to gather you all here tonight to tell you that I have spoken to the constabulary. And for all their avowed lack of concern for freaks like us, I believe that they are taking the disappearance of Ilia, Evaline and Angeline and Pinhead seriously.'

There was a growl of discontent from the performers. No one seriously expected the police to give a stuff about the disappearance of a serpent woman, two Siamese twins and Pinhead.

'Constable Parry assures me that they are doing all they can to find our missing friends.'

Peter glanced at Delphine and then across the circle, through the flames, at Simeon — who returned his gaze steadily.

'Maybe someone here knows more than they're telling,' said Peter quietly.

'What?' snapped the Colonel, turning sharply. 'What d'you mean?'

'I mean,' repeated Peter, feeling more confident, 'that maybe someone here had something to do with their disappearance.'

There was another chorus of disbelieving noises, but the Colonel shushed them.

'If you have an accusation to make, Dog Boy Peter,' perhaps you should make it.' This was Simeon, his head tipped back, pointed chin thrust out.

'It is not an accusation that he makes,' said Delphine, coming to Peter's defence. 'But a suggestion, no more.'

'And who are you suggesting is involved?' asked Madame Horchata.

'I'm not suggesting anyone,' said Peter, suddenly feeling that this had been a bad move. If he'd had something other than vague suspicions...

'You have been with us just two weeks,' said the Colonel, eyes narrowed. 'And whilst we have welcomed you here as one of our own, I think you should be careful about what you say. They were all loved by us, part of our family. To suggest that someone here would wish them harm...' He shook his head theatrically.

Delphine stepped in to defend him.

'Dog Boy Peter is still getting to know us,' she said. 'He does not yet understand how our family works. Give him time — he will understand soon.'

There were more mutters — conciliatory, this time. Even Madame

Horchata winked at him and gave him a playful punch on the arm.

`So....' Said Topper after a few moments' awkward silence. 'Where's that rum?'

As the rum was passed around, the night dissolved into a warm, amicable fuzz; Madame Horchata read fortunes, Topper fetched more wood for the fire, and Peter sat on his haunches next to Delphine and listened to more tales of her life as a mermaid in Paris. Even Simeon seemed entranced as she recounted being presented to the royal court where they'd set up a huge tank of water to watch her swim. As their laughter rang out into the warm, autumn evening, Peter realised that he hadn't thought about Bernice or Adrian since this morning. Delphine must have caught sight of his expression.

`What is wrong, Dog Boy Peter?' she whispered as Leo The Lion Man began to chase Sylvie around the fire playfully on all fours. 'One second you are smiles and laughing and then...'

'I miss them,' he sighed, folding his arms across her knees and resting his chin on them. She scratched him gently behind the ear.

`And they must miss you. Do not worry — if it meant to be that you return home then, God willing, you will go. Yes?'

Peter just grunted.

`And I,' Delphine said, gently lifting his head from her lap, 'am to go to my bed now. I am not so good with the rum.'

She kissed him gently on the forehead.

`Good night, Dog Boy Peter.' Have good dreams of your home. Remember that you carry the ones you love here.' She touched her chest. 'We all do.'

Gradually, in ones and twos, the company drifted away from the fire. Peter found himself finishing off Delphine's rum — and very quickly wished he hadn't. A fuggy blanket smothered him and the world as he lay on his back, looking up at the stars, feeling the dying heat from the fire on his face, hearing the crackle of sparks.

`What you said earlier,' came a voice, just inches from his ear. Peter shot bolt upright to see Simeon, squatting on his haunches, at his side. 'You don't know what you're talking about, Dog Boy Peter.'

It took all Peter's concentration to focus on the man, silhouetted against the fire.

'I know what I know,' he mumbled, his tongue sticking to the inside of his mouth.

Suddenly, Simeon's hands were at Peter's throat — not strangling, just controlling, holding him down. An act of dominance to show the boy who was in charge.

'Why are you doing this?' asked Peter, his words overlaid with the freight train pounding of his own heart, as he struggled to get up.

'Why am I doing what?' asked Simeon.

`Treating me like this...' Peter gestured around feebly as if someone might suddenly appear and stand up for him, argue his case. If he even knew what that case might be.

Simeon didn't answer. Suddenly, the hands *were gone* and, gasping, Peter sprang to his knees. The world reeled around him.

`Well?'

`If I understood the question, Dog Boy Peter, I might be able to answer it.'

`And stop calling me that!' Peter spat. 'My name's not "Dog Boy Peter". It's Peter.'

`Just Peter?'

Peter just glared at him. Part of him wanted to tell Simeon his full name, Peter Summerfield. Part of him wanted to hold that back, to clutch it to him like a comfort blanket. Part of him just wanted to punch Simeon, to see him on his back on the floor, *cowering*.

`Just Peter,' was all he said, feeling his rage fall back from the boil to a gentle simmer.

`If you won't tell me your full name, then it's not a name at all, is it?'

Peter pulled his lips back in a gesture of disdain — Simeon grinned wolfishly, exposing his stained teeth.

`That's better.'

Peter sat back on his haunches as the fire crackled and spat sparks into the autumn night. He broke out in a grin.

`You're full of it, aren't you?'

Tull of what?'

`Full of shit.'

It was Simeon's turn to grin.

`Aren't we all?'

`Don't start all that — that philosophy bollocks.'

Simeon just shrugged — and as he did so, Peter saw a movement on the back of Simeon's wrist. The cobra tattooed there blinked its eyes.

`How do you do that?' Peter asked. Simeon's eyes narrowed and something dark flitted across the tattooed man's face.

`Tell me!'

Simeon's eyes widened infinitesimally, but to Peter it was as though someone had turned on a light in the man's head. He felt his nose twitch — there was a scent in the air that hadn't been there moments before, something itchy and tingly, citrus and vinegar and sweat and....

`How do I do what?'

`I've seen it,' hissed Peter, the muscles in his thighs tensing up as he pulled himself into a kneeling position. 'I've seen them move before.'

If Simeon thought his expression was one of genuine puzzlement, then he was reckoning without Peter's suddenly enhanced senses. Everything about the man — his posture, his smell, the dilation of his pupils, the sheen of sweat on his face... Everything screamed out something different.

`How?'

`Isn't that what you should be explaining to me?'

`How can I explain something that's just a fantasy? You're mad!' Simeon laughed hollowly. 'How can —'

He stopped sharply as Peter's right hand shot out and grasped his wrist, holding it like iron.

`Tell me,' said Peter, his voice low and level. He felt a strand of saliva drip from his bottom lip but did nothing to prevent its steady, inexorable fall to the trampled grass beneath him.

`You wouldn't understand.'

Not if you won't tell me, I won't... It's connected with the twins and Ilia and Pinhead, isn't it? You've done something to them — something to do with your tattoos. I'm right, aren't I?'

In the flickering light of the fire, Simeon narrowed his eyes, ever so slightly. To Peter, it was as if the man had waved his arms, so vast and expansive was the gesture.

`If I told you...' Simeon broke off and lowered his head so that his greasy black hair fell down, obscuring his face. He paused and Peter could hear his breathing, every breath a wave crashing on an alien shore. An alien shore that scared him.

Simeon looked up so suddenly, his eyes instantly so wide and bright and dark and deep that it was as if he'd slapped Peter in the face. The boy lurched backwards, reflexively, sprawling full length on the grass and catching the side of his head of the corner of Delphine's little wooden stool.

Suddenly, Simeon was there, kneeling at his side, his long, slender fingers cradling Peter's head, searching out the pain.

`Get off me!' cried Peter, trying to pull away.

`You're hurt,' said Simeon quietly.

`It's fine.'

Simeon tried to pull back, as if stung, but Peter's hand snapped out and grabbed Simeon's wrist again. And before the man could stop him, with his other hand Peter wrenched up the sleeve of Simeon's white shirt, exposing the serpent tattooed around his arm. In the bronze light of the fire, the creature's eyes blinked, as if suddenly exposed to daylight, and its tongue licked around the man's knuckles.

`There!' hissed Peter, shaking the man's arm. 'Explain that!'

There was once an angel who walked on the Earth as a man. If the stories are to be believed, he walked on many Earths, at many times, as many men. He would appear from nowhere when he was most needed and then vanish once his angelic duties were done.

Some speculated that he'd been cast out of Heaven for disapproving of God's plan for man; that he'd argued with God himself and that, for his gall, he'd been condemned to forever wander the Earth alone. Others

speculated that the angel was a god. Not the God, but a god — one of a pantheon, and that he'd chosen this world as his own, acting as its champion and defender. The stories say he battled with many foes - demons and men and far stranger things. And that, one day, he almost met his match. The details of the encounter are lost but they say that the angel fell mortally wounded, stabbed through the heart by his enemy, and that his enemy walked away, leaving him for dead.

But the angel's enemy didn't count on the bond that he had with the Earth; and that, in some way, the Earth helped the angel grow a new heart to replace the dying one in his chest. And when it was done, the angel ripped out his own twisted, diseased heart, and gave it away to a carnival, simply because the idea of it amused him.

No one knows what happened to the angel after that, but the heart was placed in a jar of preserving fluid and kept. Over the years, its providence was forgotten and the heart — little more than a curio, now — changed hands several times.

'What's that got to do with you?' snorted Peter. 'You telling me that you're the angel?'

'I haven't finished.' Simeon pulled out a half-full whiskey bottle, uncorked it and took a noisy swig before thrust the bottle in Peter's face. He recoiled, the smell making him feel nauseous.

'Of course I'm not the angel...' He paused and narrowed his eyes. 'Just listen... There was this boy...'

And the boy was a sickly child, constantly feverish, constantly coughing. The doctor said would wouldn't see his first birthday and that his mother should prepare herself for the worst. It wouldn't have been the first of her children she'd buried in their first twelve months of life.

But she felt there was something special about this child, something that made her — against her usually better judgement — allow a peg-selling gypsy woman into her home when the boy, who she named Simeon after her own father, was all but six months of age.

The gypsy accepted the woman's penny and cooed and fussed and tutted over the pasty doll of a child before telling the woman that, because she'd been kind enough not to throw her off her doorstep, she thought she might be able to help the child.

The woman — not a stupid woman by any means — began to sense a con. And expecting the gypsy to produce some magic and worthless concoction from beneath her skirts, she asked her to leave. But the gypsy said that this was something different, that'd she'd have to go back to her caravan for it, and that there'd be no charge unless it helped the child.

Still wary, Simeon's mother agreed, and within an hour, the gypsy was back. Wrapped in an old sack and slung around her neck in a brown leather bag, was a jar. The glass jar with the angel's heart in it.

After all these years, it was no more than a twisted, toughened lump of meat, like a steak that had been left over the fire for too long. But even as the gypsy fished the heart out — telling the woman its story as she did so — the woman sensed something strange about the heart. And she knew it could help Simeon.

Together, they dried the lump of flesh and bound it against Simeon's bony chest with bandages, just above where his heart was. Instantly there was a change: the boy's stertorous breathing became less laboured. And for the first time she could remember since she birthed him, she saw the child relax. And smile. The woman broke down and wept tears for the simple smile of a child. Within seconds, he was in a deep sleep.

True to her word, the gypsy asked for no payment. She went away, saying she would return.

But she never did. Neither the woman nor Simeon ever saw the gypsy again.

‘Show me!’ Peter hissed, his face feral and wild, sheened with sweat. He looked up from where he knelt in the dying light of the fire, up into Simeon's eyes, like a suppliant at the feet of his god. Dog Boy Peter's heart pounded in his own chest and he knew that it was perfectly in time with Simeon's. And that their destinies were entwined.

And Simeon grew up strong and healthy — and, strangely enough, so did his three brothers and his sister. All of them, against the odds, growing up hale and hearty. All the numerous childhood afflictions and illnesses that would normally beset such children were somehow averted. And his mother (his father had left before Simeon was even born) lived to the ripe old age of 40 before she died peacefully in her sleep, happy that her children had grown up so strong and healthy.

And then Simeon left home. It's said that it was at his shame at being unable to save his mother from death that drove him away. That, somehow, even whilst the angel's heart had been able to bring health to the family, it had only limited powers and that these had been exhausted.

‘And...?’

Simeon frowned.

‘And what?’

‘What happened then?’ Peter's breath was deep and ragged, as though he'd just run a marathon. He could smell himself, dark and musky in an animal way that he'd never noticed before.

‘And then I came here, joined Colonel Scarlet's circus.’

Peter dropped his gaze to the deep 'V' of Simeon's shirt, beneath which he could see the edges of the man's tattoo — the one of the lion.

‘And what about the tattoos? Where did they come from? Who did them?’

Simeon gave a little shake of the head.

`No one "did them",' he said. 'They're just there.' He paused and peered out into the darkness beyond the glow of the fire. 'You want to see?'

`I've seen them before,' Peter replied, but Simeon cut him off with a raised hand. He leaned forwards until their faces were just inches apart.

`No,' he whispered, his eyes never leaving Peter's. 'You want to see...? You want to see them move?'

For a moment, Peter was shaken. Did he want to see them move? Really, properly move...? Before he could answer, Simeon stood up and unbuttoned his shirt. Peter stared up at him, still kneeling, as the man slipped out of his sleeves and tossed the shirt to the ground.

Peter had seen Simeon shirtless many times, but he'd never really noticed the individual tattoos that wove together to cover the man's torso. Until now, it had just been a riot of line and colour, interweaving and tangling, *faces*, animals, plants — *even* a sun *and* a moon, high on Simeon's chest. In the heat of the fire, Peter could see a sheen of oily sweat spring out. Simeon looked as though he'd been varnished. He rotated his shoulders backwards in small circles, alternating them, loosening his muscles, giving the clever impression that some of the tattoos were alive.

`That's what everyone sees,' said Peter, half disappointed.

`Not everyone,' Simeon countered, stretching down a hand for Peter. The boy took it and Simeon helped him into a standing position, face to face. He gestured towards his left breast. 'Look.'

And Peter did.

Nestled there, between an ornate palm tree and something that looked like a centaur, was a heart. Not just a heart, though — a perfectly rendered, lifelike human heart. Peter couldn't remember whether he'd seen it before.

`Is that the angel's heart?'

Simeon nodded, and as Peter watched, it began to beat — dum-dum... dum-dum... dum-dum...

He clasped his hand to his own chest, where his own heart took up the rhythm - dum-dum... dum-dum... dum-dum...

In fear, Peter tensed, as if to back away, but he caught Simeon's eye and stayed where he was.

+Together+ it whispered to him, just like before, in Simeon's caravan - only louder, more insistent. +Together+

`Can you hear it?' asked Simeon.

Peter nodded.

`It's calling to you, Dog Boy Peter. It's calling to you.'

'Why?'

`It senses something in you, some kinship. I feel it — you do too.'

+Home+

The concept flickered in Peter's head and a wave of dizziness crashed

through him before his attention was suddenly distracted by another of Simeon's tattoos, lower down on his right, wrapping around his ribcage. A creature on all fours with slender limbs and a tiny head. One of the front legs was raised and was waving!

'Pinhead!' gasped Peter. 'That's Pinhead!' He looked back at Simeon's face. 'You did have something to do with his disappearance!'

Suddenly angry, Peter backed away, on the point of shouting to the others.

'Yes, I did,' Simeon said. 'But it's not what you —'

'And the twins — Evaline and Angeline...' Peter's disbelieving eyes scanned Simeon's body until he saw them — tattooed in remarkable detail on the man's right bicep. And they, too, were waving!

'You killed them, didn't you?' Peter was aghast. 'You killed them and somehow...' He gestured towards Simeon's body, not sure how to finish the sentence.

'You've not been listening, have you, Dog Boy Peter?' said Simeon tiredly. 'This is an angel's heart — the heart of an angel doesn't kill...' He stared into Peter's eyes. 'It heals.'

'You healed them' "

'Like it healed me, and my brothers and sister — and my mother. The angel's heart can transform things, people. Don't ask me how — there are things man wasn't meant to understand, just to accept. I — the heart - healed them and they left to start new lives. Proper lives as proper people, not freaks.'

'So why... why is it calling to me?' Peter's head was spinning with all this. 'Because I'm a freak?'

'The truth? I don't know. But I think it shares something with you. I think it understands you, somehow. Wherever you come from, Dog Boy Peter, the heart has been there too.'

The future? thought Peter. The heart comes from the future?

+No future. Only now+

His mind began racing with the possibilities — could his mother have somehow sent it back in time, a message to him. Maybe a way home... Could that be why he sensed such a kinship with it? Maybe it, too, was cast adrift from its own time, attracted to the temporal energies that, Peter suspected, were still coursing through his own body from his trip here.

'So what now?' asked Peter eventually, his eyes drawn back to that terrible beating heart, etched, with infinite detail, on Simeon's body.

'It can heal you,' Simeon whispered.

'But I don't need healing. There's nothing wrong with me.'

Simeon gave a soft, sad laugh. 'That right, Dog Boy Peter?'

'I'm not a freak!' snapped the boy, a growl bubbling up from his throat.

'Look at yourself,' goaded Simeon, taking a step back. 'The face of a dog! Look at your hands — look at them! You're telling me that you're normal?'

'This is normal! This is me!'

`You won't face the truth, will you Dog Boy Peter?'

`What's going on?'

The thundering voice belonged to Topper who stood on the edge of the firelight, his arms folded like some vast, antique statue.

`Dog Boy Peter here,' said Simeon, gesturing. 'He won't admit he's a freak like the rest of us.'

`Keep out of it,' warned Peter, wiping the spit from his lips with the back of his hand. 'This is between me and him.'

`It is, is it?' said Topper, unfolding his arms and taking a step forward. His shaved head gleamed. 'If you attack one of us, you attack all of us.'

Peter could feel his heart hammering in his chest. Every hair on his body was standing up on end, crackling and tingling with static. He could smell the giant, hear his heart beating.

`Go back to your caravan,' Peter growled. 'I don't want to hurt you.'

Topper laughed, throwing back his head.

`I can, you know,' said Peter. And he knew he could. He knew what he was capable of. He could do bad things. Very bad things.

`Time you went to bed, little pup,' said Topper, showing his hands to the boy. 'You've had too much rum — sleep it off.'

`Don't patronise me!' spat Peter, glaring at the man. Blood and fire ran in his veins.

`OK, that's enough —' began Topper, before Peter threw himself at the man...

The boy was a blur, springing at Topper like a demented animal, snarling, growling, spit flying from his mouth. Topper reached out a massive hand to stop him but suddenly Peter was around the back of him, digging his nails — his claws — into the musclemans back. Topper howled in pain and reached round to grab him. But again he wasn't there. Another spike of pain, this time in his thigh. And again, when Topper's hand swatted down to knock Peter away, there was nothing there.

With a roar, the boy sprang at Topper's chest, unbalancing him and sending him staggering backwards into the fire. Topper's screams boiled away into the night as a fountain of sparks swirled up and around him.

`Stop it Peter!'

Peter looked up, slavering and grunting, crouching over the writhing body of the strongman. On the other side of the fire was Delphine, the wind plucking at her shawl as she wobbled unsteadily on her crutches.

`Go away!' he spat, barely seeing her. 'Go away!'

But Delphine ignored him and stumbled forwards to where Topper rolled in the embers of the fire, moaning horribly. Suddenly, Simeon was there, grabbing the giant's ankles and dragging him, inch by inch, away from it. Peter could only stand there and watch, disconnected from it all.

And all he could smell now was the smell of roasting meat and burning hair.

Peter fell to his knees and threw up.

Topper moaned and whimpered like a baby as Delphine wrapped her shawl around him. Peter knelt a couple of yards away, the backs of his hands dragging on the cool grass as he watched Simeon run his fingers over the giant's face.

I did that, thought Peter blankly, distantly. There was no feeling there - just a great big hole of nothing. The same sort of nothing that he'd felt when he'd...

Peter pushed the thought away, wrapped it up in a ball of darkness and stamped it down.

`Do it,' he said softly.

Simeon frowned at him.

`Do it!' Peter hissed. 'The heart — the magic, the... whatever. Do it, Simeon. Heal him.'

There was no argument from Simeon. He nodded — and cradled Topper's charred head in his hands, bringing his face closer. Peter saw how Delphine took Topper's hand and threaded her fingers through his. She looked up at him, sorrow on her face. What did she make of him? What kind of animal was he? Simeon was right — he was a freak. If this was what being half-Killoran made him do, he wanted nothing of it. He crawled on his hands and knees towards the three of them.

'I'm sorry Topper. I'm so sorry.'

Simeon shushed him with a glare and then looked at Delphine.

Tut his hand here,' he said quietly. 'On my heart.'

Delphine frowned, not understanding.

`Now, girl!'

Delphine did as she was told, lifting Topper's twitching hand and pressing it gently against the tattooed heart on Simeon's chest.

For a moment, Peter wondered if Topper hadn't caught light again: a soft, golden glow oozed out like honey from Simeon's chest, spreading out through Topper and Delphine's fingers and down the muscleman's arm. He gave a gasp and his body arched. Delphine tried to pull away, but Simeon slapped his hand onto hers, pressing it and Topper's paw against his chest. Tipping back his head he howled into the night as the angel's heart cried out one last time...

`Peter Summerfield! Have you any idea how long I've been looking for you?'

Peter looked around — across the darkened common, he could see some kind of vehicle, a hulking thing with strips of multicoloured light shining out into the darkness. Silhouetted against it was a familiar figure, walking towards him.

`Mother!'

`Of course mother!' snapped the voice. 'Who else? Quick, come with me — they won't wait for us for long.'

+Home+ whispered the voice, sighing gently. Smiling.

Peter ran to his mother, and took her hand, squeezing it for all it was worth. As she pulled him back across the common, he looked back towards the camp, and saw that Simeon and Delphine were staring at him, light dancing on their skin. They were smiling, just like the voice in his head. There was suddenly so much love around him, wrapped up in threads of honeyed light, that he started to cry.

`Go home, Dog Boy Peter,' said Delphine.

`Yeah,' added Simeon with a wolfish grin. 'Go home. And remember...' His voice was growing faint now as the darkness began to smother them, eating up the light. 'All the best people are freaks...'



`So, as far as we can tell Peter joined the circus and solved a mystery, and that was about it,' said Bernice. 'I know there's probably more to it. There always is. But whatever happened, Peter knows he can tell me, and there's little point me trying to pry. It could easily make things worse.' She sighed deeply.

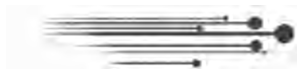
+We could help+ said the skulls. Bernice was just brushing dirt off the last one, and she gently placed it next to its companions. There were five of them now, whoever they were.

Bernice frowned at the response. 'Help?'

+Take us to Peter,+ they replied. +We can read his mind. Find the true story.+

Bernice shook her head firmly. 'No, absolutely not. He may be a boy, but Peter's mind is already his own, and he has his own way of dealing with things. Maybe he doesn't want to think about what he isn't telling me, and questioning him will make it worse. God knows, I used to rewrite my own diary enough times to make my life sound better.'

Bernice paused. 'Though that reminds me, you can take a subjective view of history way, way too far...'



Redacted

Jonathan Dennis

`It has been a pleasure working with you, Benny.'

Durness padded across the ceiling, bearing a bottle in each forelimb. Benny would have liked to have thought the need for two bottles was differing body chemistries, but knew it was due to his knowledge of her drinking abilities.

`I'll be right back with the glasses,' Durness said, and smoothed his long, white hair back over his scale ridge.

He placed the bottles on the small table to Benny's right and winked at her. She shifted in her seat while waiting for Durness to return. There was something about chairs not made by humans. The angles were just off enough to make them uncomfortable.

The chair and its accompanying work station were the only concessions to the fact that a human had been working in Durness's office the past few months. The rest of the room was standard Geckish design with furniture and fixtures mounted on all the walls and ceiling, an easy enough arrangement to manoeuvre when you stick to every surface but not so great for the gravity-bound. It had taken two days for Bernice to get tired of sitting on the floor and a further week after that for the ordered furniture to arrive. Durness had been appalled at his thoughtlessness. He thought that Bernice could climb.

Benny admired his grace as he threaded around the bookcases and other fixtures on his way to the cabinet and back with the glasses. He was spry for his age. Just as he returned with the glasses, the door crashed open. A young Geckish in a Balinth military uniform strode into the room. He was large, nearly three feet tall, and doing his best to maintain his composure, but the red flush in his crest gave him away.

`Burness,' he shouted, and both Benny and Durness turned. The Geckish had a problem with Ds and Bs. There was no equivalent in their language, just a sound halfway between that they made with their tongue and teeth ridge. In her months in Balinth (Dalinth), Benny learned to respond to `Denny' and 'Ms. Summerfielb,' but had insisted they not call her Bernice due to the confusion with her co-worker.

It was obvious, though, to whom the new arrival was talking. He didn't even notice Benny was there. He walked up to Durness and put a hand on his shoulder.

`The king is dead,' he said.

Benny caught the glasses as they fell from Durness's slack fingers.

It was an easy job, and there weren't always a lot of those around. How do

you say no to a few months helping a museum director catalogue artefacts and write a history of his country, all for an unreasonably healthy pay check in a country with a perfect climate? The most difficult part of the job had been suppressing the guilt for getting paid. If anything, it had been relaxing.

The messenger had assured them that the opening would take place the next day and that the new King would attend in his father's place. The exhibit represented Balinth embracing its history and, in the form of the museum and the accompanying book, presenting its history to other cultures as a gift. Durness went home distraught, waving off Benny's offer to keep him company.

Benny's tram entered the tourist district surrounding the ports. The centre square held a massive statue of the king, astride his woolly steed, raising his rifle in triumph. Even though he was not her king, she had learned so much about him from Durness while putting together the book. Now she had missed out on her chance to meet the man himself. All that was left was to pack and get ready to leave after what should have been a celebration and was now a memorial.

The difference should have been obvious as soon as she hit the lobby the following morning. Unfortunately, it wasn't able to penetrate her fuzzy senses from a sleepless night. Only in retrospect would she remember the line at the front desk, the whispered but intense conversations, and the adorable but deadly two foot tall lizards in military uniforms gathered by the doors. It wasn't until she got outside that she realised just how much things could change overnight.

The statue had been altered. The fierce and noble visage of the king, his long flowing hair blowing in the wind behind him, was gone. It had been replaced by the face of a young man who, while obviously related, was frankly not that regal. There was a vacant cast to the eyes and the mouth hung open, not in a war cry, but rather slackly. The scary thing, Benny thought, is that these things tended to glorify their subjects. How bad was the original if this was the result? Still, she wasn't terribly concerned. It wasn't unheard of for a new monarch, especially a young one, to want to make his mark quickly. It reduced the chance for any kind of uprising to gain hold during the transition.

The streets were mostly empty of Geckish, and those that were out were mostly police or military. Benny imagined most of them were home, gathered around their screens, in mourning for their departed king. The tram ride to the museum went by quickly with so few stops. The banners for the evening's celebration were still up, but the portrait of the king was gone, replaced by the same slack-jawed visage as the statue. The guard at the front door let her in without the usual wave. He didn't even lift his head to look her in the eye. She admired his resolve for showing up to work on such a day but didn't have long to dwell on it.

The main hall held the centrepiece of the exhibit, an actual armoured troop carrier used in Balinth's war with the country to the north, Rositan. It had special meaning for Durness. He had served in the military during that ill-fated war. He had been carried to the front in that very troop carrier. When it had arrived at the museum, he and Benny spent an entire day inside. Durness had a story for every dent and scratch. He showed her the wall by the drop chutes where every member of the unit had carved their lexigram, including his own.

It was gone. The hall was empty. The carrier, the signs, even the ropes and stanchions were gone. Benny searched the hall for any sign of where it had been taken. She couldn't even find any marks or scraps to indicate how it was removed. She went to the front desk and asked the attendant what had happened to the exhibit.

'What exhibit?' asked the attendant.

'The one in the main hall. The one that was right over there,' she said, and pointed to the empty hall.

'There is no exhibit there.'

'I know there's no exhibit there now,' she said. 'But until yesterday there was a massive troop carrier right there, and now it's gone. Where's Nevod anyway? She's usually working here.'

'I work the front desk,' said the attendant.

'You're useless, bloody useless,' Benny shouted and 'bloody useless' echoed back at her from the empty hall.

She stomped to Durness's office and entered without bothering to knock. For a moment, she thought that, in her anger, she had opened the wrong door and was prepared to apologise, but it was definitely the right door. It was just no longer Durness's office. All the standard furniture and fixtures were in place, but all the scattered notes, papers, and artefacts were gone. There were no pictures pinned to the walls. Benny's chair and table were gone as well. It was a bare, efficient work space. A young Geckish with black hair rested on Durness's desk.

'Hello, Miss Summerfield,' he said.

'What the hell is going on here?' she shouted. 'What happened to the exhibits? Where's Durness?'

'My name is Shevilin. I am the minister of history and curator of this museum.' He slipped quickly down the wall and across to Benny. He bowed graciously before her. 'I assure you that I will be able to assist you with anything regarding tonight's celebration.'

'The only thing I need your assistance for is telling me where to find Durness.'

'Durness?'

'Yes. Durness, the actual curator of this museum.'

Shevilin bowed again. 'I assure you that I am the curator of the museum.'

'Listen mister,' Benny said, drawing herself to her full height so that

she positively towered over the two-foot pompadoured lizard. 'You may be the curator today, but I've been working in this museum for the past six months with Durness, not you. Don't tell me you don't know where he is, or where the exhibit is. I want answers and I want them now.'

'Exhibit?'

For a moment, Benny wondered if something serious had happened. She'd seen enough mucking about with time to know that there was a possibility, however remote, that Balinth's history had been altered around her. But then she took another look at Shevilin, who twitched and shifted his gaze constantly and looked about as shifty as a small hairy lizard could look. No one in Balinth had time travel. This was just ordinary, pain-in-the-ass politics. She countered his unctuousness with condescension.

'Yes, Shevilin,' she said in her best classroom tone. The exhibit in the main hall. The troop carrier.'

'Troop carrier?'

'Are you a Geckish or a parrot? Yes, the troop carrier. The one Durness served in during the fourth Rositan war right before Balinth surrendered.'

Shevilin shook his head and wagged his finger at her.

'You will find, Miss Summerfield, that the glorious kingdom of Balinth won that war.'

'What?' Benny shouted in disbelief. 'You most certainly did not. I just spent half a year writing a history of your glorious kingdom with someone who fought in that war.'

"Yes," interrupted Shevelin, eager for a way to divert the conversation.

'The history arrived this morning. Let me get you a copy.'

Obviously anxious to get away from Benny, if only for a moment, he scurried to the corner of the room where a lone box sat on the floor. He pulled a book from inside and walked back to Benny holding it in from of him like a shield. Even before she snatched it from him, she could see that it was wrong. The title had been altered, from Durness's 'War to Peace' to 'The History of the Glorious Kingdom of Balinth'. Durness's name wasn't on the cover any more either. The book was now written by King Shaylon and, in nearly microscopic print, Professor Bernice Summerfield. The rather nice abstract cover the museum's art department had done was now replaced by a portrait of King Shaylon, the new king, gazing meaningfully into the distance, his hair piled high on his head and an inexplicably large pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched on his snout. Benny thought it was to make him look smarter.

Benny glanced at Shevilin, realising his pompadour was in imitation of the king's, before opening the book. The opening chapters, covering the establishment of Balinth and its early history, were relatively untouched. The main part of the book, the part covering the last hundred years or so centring on the Balinth-Rositan wars, was unrecognisable. The book now told how the great King Shaylon had personally led his people to victory

over the Rositan scum over and over again. One had to wonder why it was necessary to do it so often if you won every time.

She had to give them credit for the speed with which the hatchet job had been performed. Though, in the name of expediency, they had sacrificed any measure of quality. Even without the mangling of the truth, she was embarrassed to have her name connected to anything so poorly written. She imagined that a lot of it had come directly from the gibbering maw of the new king. The back cover held one last outrage however.

Above the slightly padded biography she had supplied was a very padded picture. Instead of the picture of Durness and Benny in his office, it now showed Benny's new official co-writer, King Shaylon, in his palace, with his arm wrapped around a woman one could only assume was meant to be Benny. She was a buxom young woman, barely above the age of consent for most civilised planets, wearing khaki shorts and a top tight enough to restrict blood flow, never mind movement. She held a gun so massive that it took both of her twig-like arms to lift the tip to her lips, which were puckered in something not quite resembling seduction so much as irritable bowel syndrome.

'Who, the hell, is that?' Benny demanded while poking the picture so hard her fingernail punched through the cover.

'That's Professor Dernice Summerfield,' chirped Shevelin.

This was a mistake. Benny took a step forward, doing the towering over thing again and Shevelin took a corresponding step backwards. They continued until she had his back against the wall. She shoved the book forward until his head was pressed between it and the wall.

'Would you like to try again?' Benny asked.

Shevelin didn't answer. He turned and scurried up the wall out of Benny's reach. She flung the book at him, narrowly missing his tail. There was nothing else handy to throw. The normally cluttered office had been thoroughly cleaned, so she went to the corner of the room to retrieve more copies of the book, which she proceeded to throw at him as he darted from fixture to fixture across the ceiling. She pinned him in the corner farthest from the door near a ceiling cabinet. He opened the door and scooped the contents out. Benny was forced to dodge the falling office supplies, including a letter opener which embedded itself on the floor by her foot. She continued to throw books at the cabinet, pelting the door with enough force to make the dry wood crack.

'Come out here and talk to me, you coward,' she shouted. 'I may not be able to climb, but I'll find a way up there and I'll drag you out by that greasy pompadour.'

A muffled cry came in response.

'My hair,' Shevelin moaned.

'That's right, your hair,' Benny responded. She knew the importance the Geckish placed on their crest-manes. They took great pride in their appearance. 'I'll come up there, drag you out, and shave you bald. You'll

look like a salamander. Now come out of there and answer my questions and everything can be just fine.'

'You won't hurt my hair?'

'I won't hurt your hair,' Benny assured him.

Shevilin opened the door of the cabinet just enough to poke his head out. Benny held up the book she had been about to throw so that the back cover faced Shevilin.

'Who is this?' she asked.

'She's the star of the king's favourite serial. They've been dating for the past few months.' Shevilin talked quietly, afraid someone besides Benny might hear.

'Where's Durness?'

'I don't know,' Shevilin said.

Benny raised her hand and mimed a pair of scissors cutting.

'I really don't know,' Shevilin shouted.

Benny wasn't happy with the answer, but she was satisfied that he was finally telling the truth. She tucked the book under her arm and turned to leave. There was nothing else she could do here. The new museum staff either didn't know what was going on or were too scared to tell anyone. A new history was sweeping through Balinth and it was time to get out before she found herself swept. There was already a replacement being put in place, after all.

'I look forward to seeing you at the reception,' Shevilin called out behind her.

Benny responded with a hand gesture that he mistook for another threat of scissors.

Durness was gone. Benny had supposed there was a chance he was being held prisoner in his home. She had no idea what she would do if that was the case, but felt she owed it to him to try and do something. They had worked together for months and in that time, she had grown close to the old soldier.

Durness was a bottomless source of information on his people, from the Inverted Catacombs of the Rockheart Plains to the origin and subsequent re-purposing of the name Geckish. (The first human to make contact, when asked to describe the lizards, said, 'They are sort of like two-foot tall geckos, kind of geck-ish.' Most races would take this kind of comparison as an insult. The Geckish believed that, since the word was used to name them, and they were so obviously, inherently great, that it must be a compliment.) Once he had grown comfortable with her, Durness had invited Benny to his home to look at his personal collection. It didn't have quite the breadth of the museum's, though he had donated some of the rarer items himself, but the items in his home held great personal meaning. It spanned items handed down through generations of his family to items he had collected while serving abroad.

Durness was gone, and not only was he gone, but his home was gone. Benny had hoped that in her haste she had gone to the wrong address, but she hadn't. Just like the troop carrier, there was no trace that a home had ever stood on this spot. There was only flat stone, featureless. All those mementos and heirlooms had been dropped down the memory hole. The best she could hope for was that Durness was in prison, but she couldn't convince herself it was true, not while looking at that empty space. There was nothing she could do. It was time to get out.

On the way back to the hotel, she saw that every building was being covered in banners honouring Shaylon. Most of them had the same be-spectacled photo from the book cover but others showed him perched uncomfortably on top of a personal tank, waving from a balcony, and other standard megalomaniacal dictator poses. Even now, crews of Geckish swarmed across the outside of the uncovered buildings, hanging new banners. Benny wasn't happy to see that the new ones showed Shaylon hugging 'Professor Bernice Summerfield' and her impressive credentials tight.

At the hotel, the quiet but intense conversations had given way to full-fledged chaos. The hotels surrounding the port catered to off-worlders and their needs, like higher ceilings and beds that were not flat rocks. The tourists, attracted by constant sun and cheap goods, were now panicking. The lobby was filled with suitcases and screaming. Benny wound her way through the churning mass to the hallway that led to the stairs. With everyone so concerned with their own safety, she was able to make her way to her room without being noticed.

Most of her bags were already packed since she had planned on leaving the morning after the opening anyway. She couldn't wait for that flight any longer and most of the bags would have to stay. The porters were already overworked and that was assuming none of them had vanished, not a safe assumption. If she wanted to get out quick, she could only take what she could carry. Most of the tourists — less seasoned travellers and stupid in the panicked mob kind of way — would be heading for the nearest space port. It was too late for that. Every flight would be booked up and the port would be turning into a pit where the biggest and richest would be muscling their way on board.

This was just a local problem though. The maglev stations wouldn't be hit with crowds until the great unwashed realised they weren't going to get a flight out. If she hurried, she could beat them to the station, get over the border to Rositan or Kibur, and fly out at her leisure. It was even possible that she could find some Balinth expatriates who could look into what happened to Durness.

Benny took a deep breath to calm down. The book dropped from under her arm. She hadn't even realised that it had been there since she left the museum. The face of King Shaylon stared up at her. It felt like he was grinning at her. In disgust, she kicked the book. It slid across the floor into

one of the larger bags. The bag yelped. Benny edged forward and nudged the bag with her foot. Nothing happened. She drew her foot back and gave it a good kick. It screamed in pain.

Benny grabbed the closest long pointy thing which, in this case, was a complimentary pen provided by the hotel. She held it out as menacingly as possible while she undid the clasp. Inside the bag, an aging Geckish nursed his wounded shin. Benny gasped.

'Durness,' she whispered. 'Thank goddess you're alright.'

'I was alright until you kicked me,' Durness said. 'That's quite the leg you have there.'

Durness pulled himself halfway out of the bag. A couple of items of clothing stuck to his back. He hadn't slept the night and his normally immaculate white hair erupted from his crest, like a lizard Einstein. Benny reached down to help him out but he waved her off.

'Durness, I'm so sorry. I thought you were dead. Your house, it's gone.'

Durness nodded as he rubbed some blood back into his leg. Benny rummaged through her shoulder bag. Unsure if the painkillers in there weren't toxic to Durness, she pulled out her flask and offered him a hit. He took a short sip and handed it back.

'They came for me early this morning,' he said. 'I got away, but I had to be careful. By the time I got here, you had already left. I hid in case they came to look for me here. Benny, please get me out of here. They will kill me.'

'Of course I will,' Benny said. 'But how did you get the clasp done behind you?'

'It wasn't easy,' Durness said. He was about to continue when there was a knock at the door.

'Miss Summerfielb,' called a voice from the other side. 'We'd like to have a word with you.'

'Get back in the bag,' Benny told Durness. He stuffed himself back into Benny's luggage and she latched it shut over him. She grabbed the book from the floor and dropped it in her shoulder bag, knowing Durness would want to have a look. If they got out of this, maybe they'd be able to laugh at it, though she doubted it. All that work was for nothing and all that work paled in comparison to what Durness had lost, compared to what everyone in Balinth was losing.

Benny opened the window and looked down, thankful that her room was only on the second floor. She heaved the bag with Durness up on to the window sill. So much for travelling light, she thought. At least Durness was well padded in there. She dropped the bag out the window and jumped out after it. The last thing she heard in the room was another knock at the door.

In times of crisis, it is sometimes necessary to overcome societal taboos and beliefs ingrained in one since childhood. This is why Benny had no

trouble nicking a luggage trolley from around back of the hotel. Her other two options were to either carry the bag with Durness or let him out and make him walk. As short as he was, Durness was solid wiry muscle and too heavy for her to carry the whole way. As for the second, while they may both be wanted, Benny had the advantage of not being Geckish and therefore looking like every other large, pink, non-scaly person in the country.

As she had expected, there were barely any tourists taking advantage of the maglevs. There weren't even that many Geckish. Benny wondered just how many had been singled out as potential problems by the new regime. How many had been taken in the night? How many had got away? Not enough, she guessed. She was able to get a ticket for a train to Rositan with surprising ease. The ticket clerk acted like nothing unusual was going on and had even offered to check Benny's suitcase. She thanked the clerk for the offer but insisted that it wasn't that heavy and she preferred to keep it with her. The Geckish shrugged as well as a being without shoulders could shrug, probably thinking that it was easier to let the silly human do whatever it wanted.

It was only an hour until the train left, forty-five minutes until it boarded. Benny spent the hour with the suitcase carrying Durness on the seat beside her. She made a show of looking through her belongings to open the bag and give him some fresh air. There were Balinth police in the station but they just milled around the station, getting into conversation with the employees or any particularly attractive Geckish. Benny opened 'her' book on her lap and tried to at least pretend to read it. It was difficult to even look at it without wincing at the numerous mistakes, both historical and grammatical, going out under her name. It came as a relief when they announced that her train was boarding. She snapped the book shut and stashed it back in her shoulder bag. It took both hands to lug Durness to the tracks and onto the car.

Luckily enough, the cars for the larger off-worlders were at the end of the train, so she didn't have to haul him that far. For the moment, they had the cabin to themselves. She set the suitcase by the window. It wouldn't be safe to let Durness out until they had crossed into Rositan. She sat by the window, the suitcase at her feet, and failing to not check the time twice a minute. The departure time came and went without the train moving. Maybe there was a last-minute influx of passengers. Maybe there was some minor technical glitch.

The door to the cabin opened. Two new members of the Balinth military entered. At least they looked new. They were very young, younger even than the standard military recruit. Their uniforms didn't fit properly. Their weapons, while impressive, were slung limply on their backs. Their crests and eyes twitched nervously. Their mouths hung open. They lacked any visible evidence of training. Benny imagined that there were a lot like them about. A good portion of the old guard was either dead or languishing in prison, replaced by press-ganged youths like the ones before her.

`Yes,' she asked, doing her best to look as clueless as they did.

One of them stepped forward. He had a piece of paper in his left hand that he examined before talking.

`Dernice Summerfield?' he said.

`Who?' Benny asked. He consulted the paper again.

`You are Dernice Summerfield,' he said. It was a statement this time and he was making an effort to toughen up.

`I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about,' Benny said.

He turned back to his fellow recruit.

`It's not her,' he said.

`Give me that,' the other soldier said and snatched the paper from his hand. Benny got a glimpse of a picture of herself on it before the two of them huddled together to examine first the picture, then her. Satisfied he was correct, the second soldier stepped forward this time.

`Dernice Summerfield,' he said. 'I am an officer in the army of His Royal Eternal Excellency King Shaylon, Ruler of Balinth, Bringer of Light and Warmth, Architect of History, Greatest of Intellect, Undefeatable in Battle, Most Potent of Lovers, and Finest Golfer in the Universe.'

`That's very impressive.'

`Quite. I have been charged with bringing you.' He paused to point at Benny. `Dernice Summerfield into the presence of His Royal Eternal Excellency King Shaylon, Ruler of Balinth, Bringer of —'

`I don't think you have to say it all every time,' the other one said. He shushed as his companion, now on a roll, continued.

`Bringer of Light and Warmth, Architect of History, Greatest of Intellect, Undefeatable in Battle, and Finest Golfer in the Universe and —'

`You missed a bit,' Benny said.

`What?'

`You missed a bit. That was definitely shorter. Right?' Benny asked the other one, who nodded.

`You missed the part about his, you know, potency,' whispered the other one.

`Why don't we just take it as read?' said Benny.

`Fine,' he said. 'Bring you into his presence where you will be judged by his infinite wisdom.' He emphasised that he was done making his point with a little click of his tongue.

`Just one problem,' Benny said. 'I'm not Bernice Summerfield.'

`This is you,' he said, pointing at the picture.

`That may be a picture of me,' Benny replied, 'but it is not a picture of Bernice Summerfield.'

Benny stood up. The two young Geckish reached for their weapons until she raised her hands. She towered over them, but she knew better than to try and fight her way out. They were strong for their size, armed, and the train was still in the station. She'd just be escaping into an entire army just like them or, worse yet, actual trained soldiers.

'I just want to get something out of my bag to show you,' she said. 'I don't have any weapons. I don't want to cause any problems. I promise. Here.'

Benny bent over and slowly opened her shoulder bag in front of them so they could see that there was no weapon inside. She pulled out the book and held it up in front of them. She pointed to the cover bearing the picture of the king.

'You know who this is?' she asked.

'It is Royal Eternal Excellency, King Shaylon, Ruler of Balinth —'

'Yes, yes, alright.' Benny turned the book over. She pointed at the back cover. 'This,' she said, 'is the King, along with Professor Bernice Summerfield, who wrote the book with him. This isn't me.'

The two soldiers took a long, hard look at the picture, paying special attention to the 'professor.' The one with the paper looked down at his paper, up at Bernice, and then at the book. He repeated this cycle a couple of times before reaching a decision. He held the paper in his hand up to Bernice.

'This says that you are Bernice Summerfield, not the woman in the picture.'

'That may be true, but the King says this woman —' Benny tapped the picture — 'is Bernice Summerfield. Now if you want to go back to His Royal Excellency, King Shaylon, Ruler of Balinth, Bringer of Sorrow, Master of Puppets, and Galactic Golf Pro, and explain to him how he's wrong, then by all means, let's go. I'll get my things.'

Benny smiled and reached for her luggage.

'Wait,' said the soldier with the paper. Benny paused, her hand almost on the suitcase's handle.

'The King can't be wrong,' he said.

'I imagine that's true.'

'Could we have a closer look at the book?' he asked.

'You know what?' Benny said. 'You can have it, my compliments.'

She handed them the book and the both of them stared at the cover. They were young boys alright.

'Frankly,' Benny continued. 'She looks like an altogether more interesting person to bring in for questioning. She looks dangerous. You might even need to strip search her just to be safe.'

They both looked up at Benny like she had just promised them candy. The one with the paper crumpled it in his hand and dropped it to the floor. He tucked the book under his arm and stood to attention.

'Thank you for your assistance,' he said. 'I hope you've enjoyed your stay in Balinth.'

'Thank you. I have,' Benny said. She closed the door behind them as they left. A couple of minutes later, the train got underway. An hour and a half later, there was an announcement welcoming the passengers into the republic of Rositan and Benny allowed herself to relax a bit for the first

time since her trip to the museum which already felt days past. Durness's hand wiggled out of the top of her suitcase. She helped him out of the case and onto a seat.

`I'm a stowaway,' he said. 'Maybe I should stay hidden?'

`I think Rositan will be accepting a lot of stowaways in the near future,' said Benny. 'Wait here.'

Benny left the cabin and retrieved a bottle of wine and two glasses from the dining car. When she returned, she found Durness trying to tame his tousled hair with inadequate human grooming products. She handed him a glass, uncorked the bottle, and poured them each a glass. She raised her glass for a toast.

`It's been a pleasure working with you, Durness,' she said.

`It's been a pleasure, Professor Summerfield,' he said. The corner of his mouth twitched in a Geckish smile. 'You are Professor Summerfield, aren't you?'

`I am now.'



+And you knew who you were.+ said the skulls, and Bernice felt she could detect a mournful note to their speech.

`Yes, I did. I do. I'm sorry you can't say the same.' Bernice paused. 'I have had a thought, though.'

+Yes?+

`Oh, don't get excited, it's more a hunch than anything else. It's just that, well, you are clearly capable of sentience, and that would suggest that you were, at one point, a living thing. But everywhere I've seen the black stone before, it's been just that — a stone, a material. A material with remarkable properties, but no sign of life, not on Danpetro, or on Earth, not really even as part of that bloody machine.'

She sat silently.

+We must know.+ Some of the skulls' own insistence was returning.

Bernice raised an eyebrow. 'Or what, you'll blow me up?'

There was no response.

`Thought so,' said Bernice. She gestured towards the pile of scrap metal she'd unearthed. 'You're not networked to any of that, and besides, it's all rifles and old crap. Nothing as elaborate as a bomb.'

+We are sorry. The minds we were in contact with, before. This was their way. To threaten, to cajole.+

`Oh, don't worry,' replied Bernice, trying to stay as breezy as possible. 'I've been threatened with worse. I'm not going to throw you back in the hole for that.'

+Thank you.+

`Besides, whatever you are, you're rare. Very rare. And rarities like you should be preserved... wherever possible.'



The Song of Old Man Bunyip

Richard Freeman

`He is like a great seal, but he's bigger than any seal you ever saw and he only lives in sweet water. He don't like no salt.' Yarran rubbed his curly grey beard and poked at the campfire with a stick. Tiny embers rose up like orange fireflies.

`Rubbish!' Kami elbowed the older man in the ribs. 'He looks like a giant emu but he's all covered with long hair instead of feathers. Under his beak he's got a pouch like a pelican.'

`Neither of you could tell the Bunyip from a duck billed platypus!' snapped Nambur from the other side of the flames. 'My great-granddad saw him once. He said that the Bunyip was five times as long as a man is tall. He had green scales so hard no spear could pierce them and great jaws with teeth like knives.'

`You men, always talking out of your backsides! Not a one of you has ever seen the Bunyip, none of us have. How can you tell what he looks like without ever having looked at him you bunch of fools?'

Oola, Yarran's wife, laughed at the men's indignant expressions.

Bernice listened with interest. The tiny recorder in her pocket was catching every word. A notepad and pen would have raised too many questions and this was less invasive. The translator she wore like a modest necklace smoothly changed the centuries-dead language in her mind and threw her own words back in the tongue of the Palawa.

`So none of you have met the Bunyip face to face?' she asked.

`No, not as such,' said Kami, refusing to meet Bernice's enquiring gaze.

`But we have heard the stories from our ancestors and from other tribes,' chipped in Adoni, a youth of about sixteen. Up till then he had sat quietly beside the great fire, occasionally slipping glances at young Toora, a girl who sat opposite him.

`And what are these stories?'

Bernice had lived with this group of Tasmanian Aborigines for almost a week now. She had seen the practical side of their lives. How they fished and hunted, how they made clothes and shelters. She had worked, eaten and laughed with them, but as yet they had said only a little of their spiritual beliefs.

Adoni shrugged his mahogany shoulders and looked up to the clear starry sky.

`They say that Old Man Bunyip is the oldest creature in the land. The oldest creature in the world, even. He was here before all the animals and people, even before the plants. They say he is the wisest of all the creatures.'

Old Man Bunyip knows all the answers to all the questions you could ever ask.'

Yarran, the chief, cleared his throat, not happy about a boy telling the stories.

'Old Man Bunyip lives inland. Us coastal folk never see him. He lives in a deep dark pool in the forest, we don't know exactly where. You would need to ask the Noeteeler people. They live inland most of the year. Us Plairhekehillerplue meet up with them in summer when we leave the coast. The Noeteeler keep the Bunyip's home a secret.'

'How do you know he's not just a story?'

Yarran laughed. 'Bernice, don't you have things you believe in that you have never seen? You don't have to see something to know it exists. You can't see the wind can you but that's real.'

'You can see the wind's effects though. Waves on the sea, the grass and tress moving, the coolness on your skin,' she answered.

'And you can feel Old Man Bunyip.'

Bernice paused, now she was really intrigued. 'How so?'

'Sometimes you can hear his song.'

'The Bunyip sings?'

'Oh yes.'

'What does it sound like?'

'It's like no other sound.' The chief stared off into space for a while as if trying to find the right words. 'You hear the waves crashing down on the shingle at the shore? Well it's like that. But it's also like the buzz of an insect or voices talking in the distance so you can make out the words. It's always just beyond the range of your hearing.'

'Why does the Bunyip sing?'

'He just does. They say his voice gets clearer and louder the closer you are to his pool. Sometimes we can hear it way down here by the sea, but not always. You might hear it yourself if you're lucky.'

'Anyhow,' said Adoni, 'who would have believed in a woman with white skin before we met you?'

Bernice laughed. Just a week ago, when the time ring had brought her back here, and she had met Adoni walking along the beach, he thought she was an ancestor ghost because of her white skin. She had to prick herself and show him her blood before he realized that she was not a spirit. He brought her back to the group, around five families of the widespread Plairhekehillerplue tribe, Tasmanian Aborigines living on north coast of the island.

Bernice explained that she had come from a land far to the north where it was much colder and that in her land all people looked like ghosts. The natives did not construct boats or even canoes, so they had no knowledge of the world outside of their island. The group had welcomed her warmly. In a land with no agriculture, where all people were hunter-gatherers, they had no concept of land ownership. The Palawa, collectively all of the

tribes, seldom made war. Co-operation between the tribes was easier and more beneficial for all.

'Hey less talk, these fish are done.' Oola lifted the skewers away from the fire and sucked fish oil from her fingers. 'Careful, they're hot.'

Talk was forgotten as they group began to eat the fish. After supper Bernice, made drowsy by the sea air, walked back to her hut. It was a small wooden affair with a domed roof of dried grass and animal skin. She slipped into the possum fur blankets and lay in the dark, thinking.

Bernice had directed the time ring to bring her to the early 1800s, before the arrival of Europeans in Tasmania. Of course the Island was then known as Van Diemen's Land to Europeans. The Palawa just called it 'The Land'. Bernice knew that within seventy-five years there would not be one full-blooded Palawa left in the world. They would be hunted like animals by the white settlers. Whalers and seal hunters would decimate tribes, killing the men and taking the women. Sheep farmers would over run the lands and kill whole groups of 'inconvenient' natives. Western diseases would sweep the population.

The final nail in the coffin were well-meaning missionaries, who had transported the remaining natives en masse to Flinders Island as a sort of reserve. Conditions on the island were so bad that almost all of them had died within a few years.

She recalled reading of the last Aborigines in the 1870s. Dressed in western clothes, they were kept as a curiosity to be paraded on official engagements. Their whole culture and language had been exterminated. A few people of mixed blood had persisted, and in the 20th and 21st centuries tried to reconstruct something of the lost language from the few words that had survived but it was a hopeless task. By Bernice's time they were not just gone, but largely forgotten as well.

When Bernice first read about the Palawa, she realized the unique opportunity open to her. Time travel theoretically allowed the anthropologist and archaeologist to study any period in person. Bernice was the first to visit the Palawa prior to European contact. It was a period of history forgotten by most. The Palawa left no great monuments, had no written language and built no cities. Their oral tradition died with them. That's why her visit was so important.

Bernice tried to keep that importance in mind. A scientist needed to be detached in order to record data properly. But she was a human as well as a scientist. Thinking about the fate of these smiling, hospitable folk broke her heart.

She rolled over and began to drift off to sleep. She thought she heard something, perhaps some of the villagers talking. She strained to hear them but couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

Bernice woke from a dream that faded even as she tried to recall what it was

about. The images vanished like melting snow. All she could remember were old, sad eyes. She stretched and rolled out of the covers.

The morning was spent with the women of the group digging up shellfish on the beach. Bernice had filled her green-leafed basket with oysters, whelks and razor shells. Back at the camp the men returned from the forest. Some had baskets of fruit or edible fungus. Others had possum and wallaby. They cooked the fish and meat on the big fire at the camp. Bernice noticed that the flames were never allowed to die. Someone was on duty by the fire around the clock feeding it with wood, dried grass and kindling. Perhaps this was for religious reasons. She would ask them later, but now it was time to eat.

As always the group ate together than sat around the fire talking. It was late afternoon and the fire had begun to burn low. Yarran stood and gathered up some more wood. There was a sound like a snapping twig. Yarran fell backwards. Bernice thought he had slipped on a loose piece of wood; she ran over to him as did several others. What looked like a red flower was blossoming in the old man's forehead. It took a moment for Bernice to realize he had been shot. The snapping twing had been the retort of a rifle.

There was another crack and another man fell thrashing to the ground. The group looked to and fro in confusion as two more retorts sounded and two more people slumped lifeless to the ground.

The men came screaming from the bush, beards spiked with fat, oilskins flapping as they ran. Whalers. They must have anchored further up the coast. Bernice realised she had mistimed her visit.

The leading whaler grabbed a confused Palawa and rammed a flensing knife into his belly then heaved it upwards. The victim fell with a wet gurgle and a sound like burlap tearing. The tribe tried to run but the whalers were bearing down on them from every side. The men with guns had reloaded and sent another hail of bullets into the panicked natives.

The Palawa had no concept of guns. They had no metal craft. They made easy targets. A few of the men picked up burning sticks and tried to defend themselves. They were swiftly cut down. The air reeked of acrid gunsmoke.

Burly whalers were now grabbing the screaming women and lashing their hands behind them with rope. As one of them bounded towards Bernice he stopped dead with a look of confusion on his face.

'Ere, you're white!' His accent sounded like he might have sailed from Plymouth: You a missionary's daughter?'

Bernice couldn't answer, she was still in shock.

'Just like home,' he said, a nasty look on his oily, weather beaten features.

Bernice tried to step back and take a defensive stance, but she stumbled on a rock and before she could react he was on her. His weight bore her down. He stank of rancid fat, tar, rum and sweat.

There was a movement at the back of her attacker. His head drew back and she saw a confused look on his face. Then he fell forward, a dead weight upon her. Bernice felt a wet warmth oozing from his lips.

Wriggling out from under the limp whaler she saw a stone knife buried deep in his spine. Standing above him was Adoni. He swiftly bent to help her up.

'Bernice we have to go, quickly.' She nodded and he stopped only to grab the (lensing knife from the man's pocket.

They ran for the forest. It seemed that the other whalers were more concerned about their living booty. Glancing back they saw a burly man throwing young Toora over his shoulder. Adoni stopped and turned to go back.

'No, they'll kill you!'

Some of the whalers looked up and pointed. A bullet whizzed past the young aborigine's head.

'They can kill from a distance, run!' she screamed.

Adoni turned back to Bernice and they ran into the trees. They ran aimlessly, lungs aching. Behind them they heard crashes and shouts. The crack and whizz of gunfire sounded. Wet branches slapped legs and faces as they crashed through cycads, eucalyptus and ferns. Both of them fell several times.

Bernice had no idea how far they had ran before they collapsed gasping into the damp loam.

It was a while before either of them spoke.

'Those men, they were like you.'

'No, they are nothing like me.'

'But they are pale like...'

'They come from the same country that's all. I didn't bring them. I didn't know they would come.' Bernice stopped herself. That last part was a lie. She had known they would come, but not so soon.

'I know you didn't bring them. That big one, he was attacking you.'

'You saved me, thank you.'

'Why did they come?'

Bernice realized that the youth had shown little emotion so far. He was still in shock, his body pumped full of adrenaline. He was shaking, they both were.

'They hunt whales, but they have come here to take your women.'

'Adoni paused as what she said sunk in. 'We have to go back. I can't leave Toora and the others. Where will they take them?'

'They will probably take them back to their ship.' She saw Adoni's blank look, then remembered that the Palawa had no boats, they had reached Tasmania before it was an island.

Bernice realized that Adoni needed to catch up, and fast. She explained about the ships as well as she could, and how the guns worked. She

needed Adoni to be cautious, but not overawed by the whalers and their weaponry. He learned quickly.

`Then what can we do against men who can make their village float across the sea and can spit stones to kill to kill people from far away. What chance do we have?'

Bernice thought for a moment. `Yarran said there were other tribes further inland. Maybe they could help us?'

`The Noeteeler, they live in the forest but I don't know where exactly. We could try to find them, gather more men and chase out the white man, get our women back.'

Bernice winced inwards at the youth's optimism.

`In the meantime we need to find somewhere to sleep. It will be night soon. I will see if I can find a cave, if not we can build a little but from leaves.'

Adoni marched resolute into the trees and Bernice followed.

They had walked for about an hour when they came across the cliff The pale, weathered limestone rose up out of the dripping forest for perhaps a hundred feet.

Adoni seemed to recognize the landmark. 'I've been here before, there are caves.'

They walked along the foot of the cliffs until they came to an opening in the rock gnawed by time and water. It was six feet wide and of a similar height.

Bernice looked inside. The cave was worn deep into the cliff face. She couldn't see an ending to it.

`Sun's getting low. We got here just in time.' Adoni joined her in the cave. Its floor was relatively dry.

`If I gather up some dry wood can you make a fire?'

Adoni shook his head. 'I don't know how. We lost the art of starting fires many generations ago. That's why we always keep the big fire going, every day. When we move camp we carry embers and coals in green-leaf baskets. We always have the spark to start a new fire.'

Bernice did not like the idea of spending a night in a cave with no fire. Looking round on the floor she saw some clumps of dry grass.

`Go and get me some wood. I can start a fire.'

The youth looked surprised but rushed off to find wood. By the time he came back with an armful of logs Bernice had collected a pile of dead grass to use as kindling. She piled the logs on top of the grass and briefly debated whether she should make the fire the old fashioned way. Sadly concluding that any anachronism she displayed could hardly make any long term impact, she unzipped one of her trouser pockets and removed a basic laser cutter. She flicked off the safety mechanism and tapped the red button once, and a small spark of energy leapt to the grass. The dry vegetation started to smoulder then burn.

'I always knew you had magic in you Bernice,' Adoni said, grinning. He took up a stick and began binding the whaler's flensing knife to it with lengths of dried grass, making a spear. 'You wait here and I'll bring back supper.' With that, he slipped out into the dusk.

Bernice slumped down beside the fire. How could she tell this boy what the future held? He had been so strong in the face of the day's events. Yes, shock was buffering him, but never the less he had shown amazing resilience. She couldn't bring herself to tell him it would all be in vain, that in his lifetime the Palawa would be wiped off the face of the Earth leaving only the barest trace.

It would be easy to activate the time ring now and vanish back home whilst Adoni was out hunting. But she couldn't do that either. She would stick beside him until this journey was ended, and share whatever it brought them.

It was an hour before he returned, proudly holding a dead wallaby.

They cooked the wallabies' flesh on sticks and ate their fill of the rich, dark meat. Afterwards, Adoni took up a burning stick.

'Come on Bernice, I have something to show you.'

He led her back into the shadows further down the cave. There, illuminated by the dancing flames were Palawa cave paintings.

'These are scenes from Altjeringa — the Dreamtime,' he said. 'It was a time long ago but it's also now. Back in the Dreaming men and animals were spirits. Each spirit decided what animal it wanted to become in this world then left the Dreaming. Man was the last to go. But the Dreaming still exists today. When a baby is born its spirit comes over from the Dreaming. When we die we go back to the Dreaming. The Dreamtime is timeless. It exists then and now. In the Dreaming there were also great spirit creatures and people like the ones in the painting.'

The pale stone was festooned with figures rendered in ochre, charcoal and other organic paints. There were stick like humans and a menagerie of weird creatures. They were painted in the typical aboriginal 'x-ray' manner. Inside the outline the bones and internal organs were drawn with surprising accuracy.

Adoni talked her through the paintings: there was the Moongoon-gali the giant goanna, a large lizard-like creature with the people he had eaten drawn inside his stomach; the Junjudee, a group of tiny people dancing around some rocks; the Quinkin, a cannibal giant; and strangest of all, the Wonambi, the Rainbow Serpent that brought the rain that gave life to the land, creating the lakes and rivers of the Dreaming.

Bernice was struck by the analogue of dragons, fairies and trolls in European lore.

At the back of the cave was a strange, circular painting. There was little detail in it save for a circle and what looked like to large, sad eyes.

'That's Old Man Bunyip,' explained Adoni. 'See, he is looking out from his pool.'

'Why have they only drawn his eyes?'

'I don't know. It was the ancestors of the Noeteeler who painted these things not the Plairhekehillerplue.'

'Do you know where to find the Noeteeler from here?'

Adoni nodded. 'Yes, I've known these cliffs since I was a boy. The Noeteeler camp is less than a day's walk away but we will need sleep.'

They returned to the fire. Bernice tried to make herself as comfortable as she could on the bare earth. The day had been horrific and exhausting. Despite the lack of comfort she was soon sleeping. She dreamed a dream of some far off, voice calling her in musical tones at the periphery of her hearing. She strained to make out words or phrases and awoke.

There was a noise outside the cave. It switched from a high-pitched growling wine to a deep guttural snarl then flipped back again. The sound was hideously inhuman. It seemed that several creatures were crashing around just yards from the cave entrance.

She took up a log, still glowing from the fire, and peered outside. In the moonlight a number of small, powerful creatures were squabbling over the wallaby entrails. Each was about the size of a badger, and in shape not unlike a Staffordshire bull terrier. They had silky black fur with a white patch at the throat, long whiskers and pricked ears. They snatched at the offal, gulping it down between screeching at each other with teeth bared.

'Adoni had awoke and was standing behind her. 'They sound fierce but they don't do any harm. They only hunt small animals and clean up the dead.'

Bernice realized that she was looking at Tasmanian devils, stocky little meat-eating marsupials. Suddenly, as one, the devils all looked up towards a stand of ferns. Then they turned and scattered. A larger creature was slipping silently from the vegetation.

It was the size of a German shepherd dog and shaped like a wolf, save for its long thick, stiff, kangaroo-like tail. It was a sandy brown colour but on its rump it was banded with tiger like stripes. It turned to gaze on Bernice and Adoni with deep amber eyes. Its long jaws gaped wider than any dogs could, looking almost like a crocodile and showing rows of shearing teeth. It made a high-pitched double bark like a creaking door then sniffed at what was left of the entrails. It turned away from the dead meat in disdain then vanished like a shadow into the night in search of living prey.

'That was Corinna,' whispered Adoni. 'The lord of the forest, the greatest predator in the Land.'

Bernice realized that she had just seen a Thylacine, or marsupial wolf. It was an astounding example of convergent evolution, a flesh-eating marsupial that resembled the placental wolf because it filled a similar ecological niche in a part of the world where there were no wolves or dogs. It had been thought that the white settlers hunted them into extinction after they began to feed on the easily-killed sheep imported from Europe.

She recalled seeing film of what was then thought to have been the last individual; a female misnamed 'Benjamin' pacing up and down in her cage at Hobart zoo in 1936. Benjamin had died later that year and the species were declared extinct. She felt privileged to have seen one and it made her wonder what else lurked out there.

Knowing that they were in no danger the pair returned to the cave to sleep.

In the morning they ate a breakfast of cold wallaby meat and carried what they couldn't eat with them.

Adoni seemed to know where he was going. He found the forest paths in the area and they made good headway. It was early April by western reckoning. That made it autumn here but the summer's heat had not yet loosened its grip. They started early to avoid the heat and kept in the shade. At around noon they stopped and ate. They drank from a forest stream and did not move again till the heat of the day began to subside.

It was early evening when they came upon the Noeteeler settlement. As they walked from the trees into the clearing they were struck by two things. The great central fire was out. Not even a wisp of smoke came from the cold, black ashes. And there was virtual silence. No children playing, no women talking, no men about their work. The one noise they could hear was a buzzing.

They wandered into the eerily still village and saw what had happened. The cold bodies of men lay scattered around in the dirt. Some bore the gaping holes of rifle wounds other bearing stab and slash wounds of flensing knives and cleavers. No women were among them. The weird buzzing came from ugly clouds of flies that were contesting ownership of the cadavers. Many of the bodies were already fly-blown and had begun to swell with internal gas. The pair gagged at the stench. The massacre had obviously happened several days ago.

'Not here too. The white men got here before us.' Adoni sank to the ground holding his head in his hands as if the last shred of hope had been stripped away from him.

Bernice went to comfort him as he rocked back and forth like a child. The hope had been the buffer between him and his grief and now that buffer had collapsed.

There was a noise from one of the tumbledown huts. A dry sound like a low rasping moan. Bernice turned and walked towards the noise.

On the floor of the hut lay an ancient man. His skin seemed like dried leather stretched over bone. A long, curling beard hung to his chest. He looked up and flinched as he saw white skin.

'It's alright. I won't hurt you.'

The man looked surprised at the Palawa tongue coming from a white mouth.

'Adoni, here, quickly someone is still alive.'

The youth staggered into the hut, tears streaking his dusty face.

`Warringal?' He bent towards the old man.

`Adoni?'

`Don't try to speak, you're hurt.'

Bernice looked down at the man's side. There was a gunshot wound, obviously badly infected. The skin around the hole was already black with gangrene.

`Don't worry about that. I can't feel no pain thanks to these.' He stuck out his tongue to show the herbs he had been chewing.

`Pale men came, like ghosts. Killed the men, took the women. They had sticks that spat fire. One of'em got me. Left me for dead.'

`They came to us too. There must be lots of them up and down the coast.'

He motioned to Bernice. 'This woman is helping me. She comes from their country but she's not like them. She says they can cross the sea in villages that float and move by catching the wind.'

`We can't fight them that's for sure boy. Spears against fire-sticks? You might as well try to fight the lightning.'

`We can't just let them swarm across the land. Our people will vanish. We came here to ask you Noeteeler folks to help us get our women back, to fight the white man.'

`You're too late boy, I'm the only Noeteeler left and I'm dying.' The old man struggled into a sitting position. Bernice offered him some water from her canteen. He looked at the plastic flask with suspicion at first then seemed to realize that nothing much mattered any more and gulped down the water.

`There's one how might be able to help you but I ain't seen him in a very long time. Too old to get out to where he lives these days.'

`Who?'

`Old Man Bunyip. He's lived longer than anything in the land. He knows the answers. If anyone can tell you how to drive out the white man and get your womenfolk back it's him.'

`So you have seen him?' Adoni breathed.

`Oh yes, many is the time. Ever since I were a boy.'

`Where do we find the Bunyip?'

`Just walk into the forest and he will do the rest. You're getting close to his land now and you will hear his song. The song will guide you. But beware its dangerous territory.'

`But the Bunyip's not savage is he?'

The old man smiled.

`No son, the Old Bunyip's a good 'un but there are other things out there too and not all of'em are friendly. Every place has its predators. Back in the Dreaming this land was connected to a bigger land. Across this land lived men, animals and creatures of the Dreaming. There were lots of Bunyips back then. Now old man Bunyip is the only one left.'

`After the dreaming the sea rose up and cut the land off. The Bunyips

on the bigger land died one by one and with them the Dreaming creatures vanished. You see men can only see the creatures of the Dreaming in this world thanks to the Bunyip's magic. Now there is just one Bunyip and this is the only place where men can see the Dreamtime creatures. But it works both ways; the dreamtime creatures can see you too. Not all of the creatures of the Dreaming are friendly.

'Now you go and find that Old Man Bunyip and ask him what's to be done.'

'We can't leave you here,' said Bernice, putting her hand beneath the old man's head.

'Don't you worry about me. I'll be with my ancestors soon. I'm going back to the Dreaming. I've waited for a long time. The Dreaming is the real world. This one is just a shade.' As she rose he smiled. 'I'm glad you're not all monsters. At least one of you is good. Maybe more good folk like you will come one day.'

Warringal closed his eyes and began to breathe more slowly. They waited with the old man till he died, then left the village.

'Warringal said we have to follow Bunyip's song. I suppose we must have to hear it first.'

They sat on a fallen tree in the forest.

'Adoni, sometimes I think I can hear something. It's not there always but it's like a distant voice or music in my head.'

'Maybe we need to just sit and listen miss, empty our heads of thought.'

Bernice nodded. They sat in silence. The warm forest thronged with small noises. The buzz and chirp of legions of insects, the call of birds and frogs, the odd unidentifiable rustle. After a while there seemed to be another noise underlying the forest sounds. It was more of a feeling than a noise. The more they listened the more it seemed internal. Something pulling gently inside the mind. Both instinctively knew the way they had to go. They rose and walked further into the green.

The feeling/noise became more insistent as they walked. It was not unpleasant or even irritating but it was there and slowly growing stronger. Now it seemed to be within and without, the internal pull matched by some indefinable characteristic of the air around them. A kind of a buzz, a sort of a half glimpsed shimmer like a passing heat haze, a feeling of a difference.

They walked four hours until the sun began to creep low in the sky again. Adoni made a crude shelter from branches covered with palm fronds. They made a small fire, ate a meagre supper and then slept with the song of Old Man Bunyip as a lullaby.

The drops of water awoke her. They fell between the fronds and hit her face. Bernice awoke and ran her fingers through damp hair. Rolling over

she saw that Adoni was not there. She wondered if he had gone to hunt. The wallaby meat was running low.

'Bernice! Bernice!' She heard his excited voice call from the forest. She rose up wondering fearfully what was wrong. It was raining; the trees and rocks ran with tiny rivulets like Lilliputian waterfalls. Adoni came running, the rain making his body shine.

'What's wrong?'

'Come, quickly, see this!' He sounded more exhilarated than frightened. He grasped her hand and together they ran to where the forest opened up onto a bluff that swept down to a valley. The pulse of the Bunyip's song could plainly be felt. Above them the wide sky was filled with heavy rainclouds.

'Look, a thing of wonder!' He pointed to the sky. Bernice's jaw dropped as she saw something fantastically huge and unspeakably beautiful deporting itself among the clouds. Bernice had seen so much in her life. During her travels she had gazed on wonders and marvels such as legends were made of. But she had rarely seen anything like this.

It was some kind of living thing. An elongated form hundreds, maybe thousands of feet long. Its head was like that of a proud horse, save for the lack of external ears and the forest of crystal swords that lined its mouth. A crest of spines ran down its back. The body was serpentine and coiled itself into unfathomable shapes. It was coated with scales that shone like oil on water, refracting the light into every imaginable colour. Along its sides were iridescent... fins? Wings? They ran the length of the polychromatic snake-like body, one on each side. They moved in a rippling motion like the fins of a cuttlefish. Below, almost hidden on its underside were four small legs, with eagle-like claws, held close to the body.

The creature flared its nostrils and sent twin jets of vapour into the sky with a terrific whoosh. The breath condensed and more rain fell in lashing sheets.

'Wonambi, the Rainbow Serpent,' breathed Adoni. 'I've never seen him before, just heard the stories. Look at him, he's bringing the gift of water to the land.'

Bernice couldn't speak. She just gazed in awe as the Rainbow Serpent continued its dance like some immeasurable reptilian Möbius strip, fertilizing the land with its rain bringing breath. Lightning forks ran along its prismatic body accompanied by a boom of thunder.

The scientist in her was asking question after question. How did such a titanic creature fly? How did its breath produce rain? What was it descended from or related to? Was it an alien species or from Earth? But the flood of wonderment drowned all these out. Bernice realized she had seen this creature before, on countless temples, carvings and jars in Japan, China and Korea. The Rainbow Serpent was one in the same as the rain gods of the orient, the Asian dragons.

The beast tossed its head then unwound. It flexed its coils, sending

an arching ripple along its length, and vanished into the clouds. The rain began to abate and finally petered out. The air was left charged and exhilarating.

They slid more than walked down the sodden bluff. They were soaked to the skin but neither cared. They had looked upon wonder.

The song of the Bunyip was buzzing in their heads leading them onwards deeper inland. The warm sun soon dried their clothes and the forest around them was steaming. It seemed full of life, as if the water itself had generated millions of tiny beings. In some soft earth Bernice noticed something.

'Come here Adoni, look.'

There were several tiny, human footprints in the soil.

'What would children be doing out here?'

'None of the Palawa would let their kids come so far into the forest on their own. Perhaps there is another tribe around here. One my people have not met.' He smiled at the thought.

As the day drew on and grew warmer they decided to stop and rest. A huge tree towered out of the forest like a king among his subjects. It was so tall that they could not see the top towering above the rest of the canopy. An Australian mountain ash, it was bigger by far than the American giant redwoods. White settlers would hew down all the largest for wood.

They slumped at its vast base, exhausted and were soon sleeping, their backs against the trunk.

When Bernice awoke she had pins and needles. She thought it must have been the way she had been sleeping. She tried to rub some life back into her arms but found that she could not raise her hands. Something had encircled her torso pinning her arms against her sides. It looked like a white python but it was slick with a vile, viscous substance. Her arms hurt as it if stung by a jellyfish. They were becoming numb.

She tried to call out but found she had no voice. She struggled into a standing position but was jerked down violently onto her back. Looking upwards she saw her attacker. Twenty feet above her, crawling slowly down the tree trunk was a horrific creature. She realized with disgust that the snake-like appendage that had wound itself about her whilst she slept was the creature's vastly elongated tongue.

It was roughly the size of a cow and its hairless, glistening skin was the colour of arterial blood. The body was a great sac-like affair with an underbelly as pale as fish meat. It had four legs that ended in sucker-like digits with which it clung to the tree. The head was like some outsized frog or toad. The impossibly wide mouth lacked teeth but Bernice knew it would have no trouble swallowing her whole. The large, widely spaced eyes reminded her of some kind of deep sea fish. They glittered with a sickly yellow bioluminescence.

The thing made an absurd, contented mewling noise somewhere between a human infant and a cat. The queer sound seemed not to fit

the great, cumbersome, baggy creature. The beast began to haul in its hosepipe tongue and Bernice felt herself dragged from the floor. She dangled in mid air and began to be drawn upwards in a series of jerks towards the saliva festooned maw.

There was a cry and a flash of sliver. Adoni was beside her, hewing at the creature's tongue with the spear he had made from the flensing knife. Again and again the blade fell down on the rubbery flesh until it parted in a spray of white liquid and Bernice fell to the ground.

The thing made a gurgling bellow and bounded from the tree, its unwieldy mass crashing off into the undergrowth. Bernice could still not move. Adoni was heaving at the elastic tongue, uncoiling it from her body. It still writhed and twitched like a moribund snake. He tossed the loathsome thing away into the bushes and began furiously rubbing her arms.

'Are you all right Bernice? He nearly had you.'

Gradually the feeling returned to her limbs. There must have been some kind of anaesthetic in the creature's saliva.

'W-what?' She barely managed to gasp the one word.

'Yara-ma-y ha-who, a predator from the Dreamtime. He attacks sleeping people and swallows them whole.' He hugged the shaking Bernice to him.

'You're alright now. He won't be back. They only attack people when they are asleep.'

Was it trying to eat me?'

'Maybe, maybe not. The Yara-ma-yha-who swallowyou whole. Sometimes they digest a person for food but sometimes they do another thing?'

'What other thing?'

'Well they don't mate like other creatures. The way the Yara-ma-yha-who reproduce is to swallow a person then change them in their stomach. Then they vomit up the victim as a baby Yara-ma-yha-who like a butterfly emerging from chrysalis.'

The idea revolted Bernice more than being eaten alive. The Yara-ma-yha-who made no sense. There was nothing like it in the fossil record. The Rainbow Serpent, at a push, might have descended from some kind of dinosaur or other prehistoric reptile but it would have had a ghost lineage, leaving no trace in the Earth's strata. It was not impossible, but the Yara-ma-yha-who seemed to be an outrage against all biological processes.

When she was recovered they staggered on.

The song of the Bunyip was a pulse now, a vibration. It could be felt behind the eyes, in the skull and in the bones and organs. Something occurred to Bernice as they slogged through the forest. She knew about differing dimensions. One of them was speed or rate of oscillation. All atoms vibrated but some vibrated at different rates. You could have two things occupying the same space at the same time because their atoms vibrated

differently. Maybe the Dreamtime was not a different world, but this one moving at a different speed. They key seemed to be the Bunyip. What was it that Warringal had said? 'You see, men can only see the creatures of the Dreaming in this world thanks to the Bunyip's magic.'

Perhaps the Bunyip's magic was to cause a shift in vibrations at the level of atoms. Speeding things up or slowing them down so that humans could see the Dreamtime creatures and they could see humans. Maybe it wasn't even the whole surroundings that the song affected. Perhaps it was just the human body and human perceptions. They would find out soon enough

Through the throb of the Bunyip's song they heard something else, something more aural in the standard manner. It sounded like some kind of ritual chant. In a clearing they came across a group of tiny creatures no more than three feet tall. Suddenly the miniature footprints they found earlier made sense.

'I', whispered Adoni, 'don't worry they are harmless.'

Bernice was relieved that the creatures were not aggressive but she could see Adoni's disappointment at the tracks not being from another human tribe.

The creatures were short, ape-like people, naked but covered in brown hair. They looked like hybrids of bonobos and tiny men. They were dancing in a circle and chanting from prognathous mouths in a weird language that sounded something like the twittering of birds. The translator was having trouble with it. They held sticks adorned with shells and feathers which they shook in time to the chanting. To one side of the circle sat a single individual who drummed on a hollow log.

'Away...away....away'. It was the only thing the baffled translator unit could pick out of the chirping tongue of the Junjudee.

'It's a protection dance from the look of it. They are trying to keep something at bay,' said Adoni.

'What?'

'I don't know, but something bad.'

As they watched the little people began to fade in and out like the picture on an old fashioned television set with poor reception. One moment they seemed solid the next they looked like translucent ghosts. The dancers even winked out of vission completely only to reappear as solid as ever.

'How are they doing that Adoni?'

'I don't know, some kind of tribal magic maybe.' The youth looked worried. 'We should go. They are trying to drive something off. It might still be around here.'

A mile or so further into the forest and they found a swathe of pulverized vegetation meandering through the greenery. It was as if something immensely heavy had been dragged along, crushing trees and plants and leaving a great furrow. If she hadn't known better Bernice would have sworn that a big machine of some kind had driven through the woodland.

'I've not seen nothing like this before.' Adoni shook his head. 'No beast I know leaves a track like this.'

The forest was growing thinner and more open. It was strewn with boulders. The great furrow passed through the area heaving aside rocks and trees. At its end rested a monolith-like boulder of granite. Taller than it was broad, it recalled a standing stone in its outline. It must have weighed over ten tons but it looked as if it had been pushed along the furrow. It was hard to imagine just what could possess the strength to have moved the boulder in such a way.

She crept closer to the monolith. It towered some 18 feet high and was about five feet wide. The dark grey rock was encrusted with moss and lichen. About its base was mud and pulped vegetation.

'Don't get any closer,' hissed Adoni, 'look!'

A crow-like bird with a long bill, a black currawong, had settled atop the huge rock. Suddenly the 'boulder' seemed to unfold like a puzzlebox. Great arms unfurled from its sides and a ghastly face that seemed to be made of cracks and fissures leered from the bulk. A misshapen claw snatched the bird before it could move, and rammed it into the great crack that passed for its mouth. It chewed noisily, crunching flesh and bone with the stone spikes that were its teeth.

'It's a Nargun, a living rock from the Dreaming. It eats flesh. That's what the Junjudee must have been trying to drive away.'

Bernice felt acutely aware that she was made of soft meat draped over brittle calcium rods.

The thing seemed to gaze at them with two deep hollows in its 'face'.

'NAAAA-NAAAA-NAAAAAAAAA!'

The roar that came from the Nargun seemed to come booming up from the depths of the Earth itself. Bernice felt the bellowing noise deep in her stomach and her bones.

'NAAAA-NAAAA-NAAAAAAAAA!'

With an awful grinding the Nargun began to move. It had no legs but it possessed a hideous mobility, sliding along the ground on its great, flat base. As it moved it tore up the furrow Bernice and Adoni had seen before.

They both turned and ran, trying desperately to get to higher ground. Behind them the Nargun slid at a surprising pace.

'Get up onto the rocks, it won't be able to follow us,' shouted Adoni.

The ground was rising and becoming rockier. The Nargun thundered onwards, smashing aside smaller rocks and snapping trees like matches. It held out its crooked talons and ground its teeth like railroad spikes. It seemed to be gaining on them.

Bernice glanced backwards and saw that the Nargun had begun to flicker in the same way the Junjudee had earlier on. It ground to a halt and turned side to side as if searching for something. It looked as close to confused as a rock could.

The pair grabbed their chance and scrambled higher among the rocks. They were down on all fours now, scrabbling with their hands to keep balance. When they reached the top of the hill the Nargun was nowhere to be seen.

'Did you see that?' panted Bernice. 'The Nargun vanished like the Junjudee.'

'Perhaps it was something to do with the Junjudee ritual. I don't know enough about these things, I can only guess.'

The land had flattened now and the forest was beginning to become denser once more. They followed the vibration of the Bunyip's song. It led them almost like a rope, pulling them through the forest until they finally found the home of Old Man Bunyip.

It was a small pool beside a little waterfall. Almost circular, it was no more than fifty feet across. The song throbbed here, visible as a shimmer in the air. The green waters of the pool heaved as something massive rose up from their depths, the Bunyip.

Old Man Bunyip looked like a giant seal, and he looked like a great shaggy bird, and he looked like a crocodile. He resembled an outsized wombat and a giant hair-covered man and a huge dog swathed in water weed. He was green, and brown, and grey, and white and black and every other colour.

The Bunyip had any shape and no shape. He looked different each time Bernice and Adoni glanced at him. When their minds moulded the Bunyip into a shape, that shape slipped away like water through their fingers. The only constants about him were his great, sad, old eyes. And they understood why. Old Man Bunyip reached out with his mind and touched theirs.

The Bunyip was old, so very old. Its age strained the mind to imagine. It had no form because it had lived on Earth before life had form. It was a mass of naked emotions and feelings without flesh. The Bunyip only had form in the eye of the beholder. He had seen all life on Earth, whole dynasties of plants and animals rise and fall including its own.

Bunyips had vast lifespans but they were not immortal. It was as Warringal had said; this one was the last of his kind. He had sung his song and the Noeteeler people had come. He sought out company and answered their questions whilst the vibration of his song, as a side effect, allowed them to see the beasts of the Dreaming. The Noeteeler were gone now but he had drawn in Bernice and Adoni. He had called them for a reason. Old Man Bunyip wanted them to sit with him as he died. The last of his kind, billions of years old, and now he was coming to an end.

He spoke in a language that was not a language, that used words that were not words, that came from a non-mouth. He told them of the passing of the Bunyips first from the wider world, leaving only those in Australia who were known to the first people there over sixty thousand years ago.

An eye-blink in Bunyip time. Then those in Australia began to fade. One by one the Bunyips dissolved into nothingness and he was the last. Old Man Bunyip the final lonely individual. They both felt his gratitude that they had come when he called.

His weakening was what was causing the Dreamtime creatures to disintegrate. Without the song people could not see them or they see people. Like a forgotten dream the creatures of Aboriginal lore would slip away.

The multi forms settled down into something that looked like a black, ragged sheet flapping in the wind. Then this faded too, leaving only the great, old, sad eyes. The light in the eyes began to die and finally winked out. Afterwards Bernice would try to remember the colour of Old Man Bunyip's eyes but she never could.

There was something like a wind that coiled about them and stirred the trees and water and then the place was empty and hollow. Bernice saw that Adoni was weeping, and only then realized that she had been doing the same.

'He's gone now, he can't help my people, no one can.'

'But there are still other tribes.' She tried to sound hopeful.

'We are like the Bunyip. Like him the Palawa will be gone. Thank you for coming here with me miss but the journey is over now. I know what I have to do.'

'You can come back with me Adoni. I can't leave you here alone.'

The youth looked grateful but shook his head.

'No, like I said I know what I have to do now. They last Bunyip is dead so I must become a Bunyip.'

Bernice looked confused.

'The white men will take this land from my people but I will take a few of them down. I already have a tooth'. He brandished the flensing knife. 'I will get more teeth, as many as in the jaw of a Nargun. I will get myself fur, hides of wallabies and possums. I will haunt the dark shadows of the woods. I will scream and howl at night. I will give them nightmares and when one of them walks in the forest alone then the Bunyip will tear him as the Corrina tears at his prey.'

Adoni began to laugh and laugh. His eyes had a weird lustre and they rolled back in his head.

'I'll be the greatest Bunyip of them all. Those white men haven't seen a thing yet. Just watch me. The Bunyip will redden his teeth on white meat.'

He ran shrieking and laughing into the forest. Bernice called after him but she knew it would do no good. The last of his family and tribe, the encounters with the Dreaming and finally the Bunyip himself, had taken their toll on the young man's mind. The bottom had fallen out of his world and he had fallen with it.

Bernice stood alone. She felt more alone in that moment than she ever

had. The Bunyip was gone, the creatures of the Dreaming were lost to human sight, the Palawa's fate was grisly, brutal and humiliating, and the brave young man who had set out to save his people had been crushed by loss and failure.

She wanted to go home. She reached down and twisted the time ring and the lonely, empty pool vanished like a bad dream.



`When I got back home, I checked a little deeper into the surviving records from the time. For years afterwards there were strange rumours among the white settlers on the north coast,' explained Bernice. 'Stories of a hair-covered beast that haunted the forest and raided farms at night. It killed sheep, ripping them to shreds with tooth and claw. It was not a thylacine as it rarely fed on its kills. It seemed to kill the settlers' livestock just for sport. Those who glimpsed it in the night said it walked on two legs like a man but it was coated in fur like a beast. No one got a good, close look at it.

`Then it started to attack people. Always lone farmers or hunters. Anyone who strayed too far from the path in the forest. Bodies would turn up as if slashed by great talons and stabbed by long fangs. Women kept their children in doors and few ventured out after dark. And in the night the monster screamed its mad, half-human screams and the settlers lay awake their hands upon their guns, too fearful to sleep. Some of the older people recalled hearing the Aborigines talking of a monster long ago. A beast that they said lived deep in the woods. None of them could describe it and besides they were long gone now. But some of the whites remember what the natives had called the creature and they used the same term for the murderous beast among them: they called it the Bunyip.'

Bernice gave what she considered to be a suitably dramatic pause.

+But the Bunyip had died. All the creatures of the dreaming were gone.+

`Not quite,' said Bernice. 'The thylacine was very real and, although it was thought extinct for a century or so, in the 21st century they were rediscovered in the north of Tasmania. Soon other populations turned up on mainland Australia, and a few breeding groups were taken away when mankind left Earth. Although once thought dead they now live on, on a dozen different worlds.'

+It is good, that something survived.+

Bernice had brought the skulls upstairs, into the church proper. While she had been telling them the story of the Bunyip, she had also been working on a hunch. It was a ridiculous long shot, but if she was right about where the stones came from, and why they'd failed to come to life before now...

Bernice put down the screwdriver she'd been using to tamper with the machine that sprayed the preservative foam. She'd isolated the air-pumping mechanism, disconnected the canister of foam concentrate, sealed up a couple of vents... it might well work.

`I think I'm ready to try this,' she said. 'But I need to do something first.'

+Ye s?+

`I'm going to need to disconnect you from the skulls, and the rest of your circuitry. I'm afraid you're going to lose contact with these.' She leaned over, and tapped one of the optical implants fitted into one of the skull's eye sockets.

+We will be blind.+

`Yes, but hopefully not for long. And you'll still be able to communicate with me.'

+But the dark... we were in the dark for so long.+

`I know this must be terrifying. Believe me, I know.'



Turn the Light On

Nick Wallace

When Peter was newborn, Bernice would lie in her bed with him. She'd talked to him sometimes when he was still in the womb, rubbing her stomach and telling him stories about her life, the places she'd been, the ones they would see together. And now, when he was there, a tiny unsure body next to her, she would lay a hand on his stomach and whisper in his ear: 'You know me, you know the sound of my voice. If you can hear me, then you know everything is going to be okay.'

And for her part, Bernice knew if she could see Peter then everything was right with the world.

There were only voices.

She could only distinguish one in any real sense — a man's voice, but soft and considerate — the others were at a distance, blending in to one another. While she could recognise the differing tones, she couldn't make out what they were saying. The sound was distorted, like she was under water. And that sudden thought was enough to make her want to swim, to pull back towards the surface.

It was then that she realised she couldn't move, couldn't feel any response from her body. Couldn't see to know which way was up. The only thing left was the voices. Then she heard the other sound. Somewhere at the very edge of her perception was the breathing. Nothing more.

She tried to scream.

The room was dark, devoid of context, when she woke.

'Where am I?' asked Bernice.

There was a pause, then she heard one of the voices. Startling at first, because she'd almost forgotten them, but distinct enough that she could recognise it through the haze of sleep. The first voice, the man. 'Not "hello"?'

Bernice blinked, hoping her eyes would adjust. But there wasn't a hint of light, not even enough to form the vaguest of shapes. 'Excuse me?' she said to the voice.

'am I?', you said.' She could add an accent now. British. 'I would have thought,' the man continued, 'the first words you'd say ought to be "hello".'

She didn't answer straight away. On one level, there was absolutely nothing wrong with what he'd said. There was no menace in the voice, just quiet curiosity, but something about the words unnerved.

'I didn't know you were there,' Bernice said eventually. 'I must have been thinking out loud. Which is a cliché I know and Goddess knows I try to avoid those, but...' A pause, and then a sudden flood of panic.

'I can't see,' Bernice said.

Her breath began to race.

The voice was closer now. 'Calm down,' he said.

'Turn the light on,' Bernice said, gasping. 'Please, turn the light on.'

'You need to calm down,' Sterner now.

'Please,' Bernice cried, 'just turn on the —'

An artificial hissing sounded, close to her ears, slowly drowning out the words. 'Time to rest now,' the voice said. 'Go to sleep.'

'I don't want to,' Bernice said. She tried to get her body to match that intent, to push the man away. But her arms and legs wouldn't respond. Nothing happened.

'Go to sleep.'

The sound was getting louder, slowing everything down. 'I don't want to go to sleep,' she insisted, fighting it. 'I don't want to.'

But she did.

She woke with a gasp.

The darkness was still there. In those first moments, it was hard to know if she was awake or asleep, if she existed at all. Bernice began to panic once more, and that was when relief came. Because she could move. She could feel the weight of her body, the pain in her shoulders, texture against her skin once more. Letting her body settle, Bernice tried to work out where she was. She nudged her shoulders and rolled her head, feeling something soft and cool against her cheek. A pillow. Her fingers spidered around, found the edge of crisp fabric which had been brought up to her breastbone. Pillow and sheets. A bed.

That done she paused, keeping still, listening. And while she couldn't hear the voices, there were sounds. Somewhere, close by, a hiss that sounded like breathing. She said 'Hello?', but there was no answer and she hadn't really expected one. There was an animal scratching — heavy, solid, not like Woolsey — and then the breathing was gone.

Bernice took stock again. A faint creaking of metal, a low electric hum, the distant whisper of technology. Nothing else, just her mind playing tricks with the ambient noise echoing through a -

'A starship,' she whispered. There were tears on her face. She gave it a moment, just feeling them on her skin, then wiped them away. Brushing her hair back, she straightened up, commanded: 'Lights.'

Nothing happened.

'Lights,' she repeated, more firmly this time. Still nothing, and she could feel the panic building again. 'Lights!'

There was a hiss of pneumatics, then footsteps and the voice again. 'Hello,' he said. 'How are you feeling?' She didn't answer, and there was a click of a switch, and he said: 'She's awake again. I'll let you know what happens.' A static hiss, then another voice: 'Understood. Still waiting for an answer from the patch into the net.'

The footsteps came closer, Bernice turning her head back and forth, trying to get an idea of where the man was. Even if the room had been dark, there should have been light from the doorway, but there wasn't anything. And then she remembered. I can't *see*, she'd said.

Bernice flinched at the touch of his skin on hers, fingertips on her face. She lashed out with an arm, connecting with his. There was a brief tangle of limbs as she tried to fight, but he caught hold of her wrists, pushed them back against the bed.

'Please,' he said. 'You might hurt yourself.'

'Who are you? Where am I?'

'If I let go, do you promise not to fight?'

'Who are you?'

'My name is Joshua. Now, do you promise?'

'Yes,' she snapped. 'Yes, I promise.'

'Thank you.' And he released his grip.

Bernice went to rub her wrists where he'd been holding tight. 'No major damage, then,' she whispered.

The scrape of a chair. 'What makes you say that?'

'Basic body awareness, co-ordination.' She smiled briefly, 'I was able to find one hand with the other.'

'Despite not being able to see them.'

'Yes,' she said, 'despite that.'

There was a pause, then the voice — Joshua — said: 'Can I examine you?'

'You're a doctor?'

'Doctor, cook, expert barista.' Another pause. 'I'm sorry if I frightened you.'

'It was... I wasn't expecting it,' she said. 'That's all.'

'Okay,' he replied. 'Well, I'm about to touch your face again. Is that alright?'

'Yes,' she answered. A moment later, his fingers were on her skin again, walking over her cheekbones. There was pressure and pulling around her eyelids, and the buzz of an instrument.

'Do you know where you are?' Joshua asked.

'A ship of some kind. Hospital ship, something like that.'

'Rescue ship,' he confirmed.

'Rescue ship,' Bernice whispered. 'Didn't think anyone called them that any more. Not in a long time.'

'Why do you say that?'

She smiled. 'You're trying to distract me. It's not necessary.'

His fingers slipped around the back of her ears, gently moving her head from side to side. 'Not necessary for you, maybe. Indulge me, tell me about the ships.'

Bernice sighed. 'The operational principle of rescue ships is as old as the ambulance, but in this context, it's a term applied to a specific historical period; chiefly referencing Earth in the 23rd century. As the restoration

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got underway, government spending was funnelled towards military-industrial needs and rebuilding the corporations. So disaster relief was the sole province of the humanitarian agencies that remained intact after the occupation. The few ships they could muster were called rescue ships.'

'Well, welcome aboard the last rescue ship then. This is the Easter.'

'Resurrection theme, appropriate,' Bernice said in approval. 'Certainly nicer than Wargamer.'

'What a charming name,' he said flatly.

'I had a student who did a thesis on it. Kallyn. Lovely girl.'

'A thesis?'

'I'm a professor, used to teach at one of the minor universities. Wargamer was the big daddy of the 23rd century rescue ships. A state-of-art mobile facility, computer operated forcefield surgeons with every operating table, shuttlecraft for every emergency, you name it. Including an infallible analytical program to assess disaster situations.'

'Let me guess, it failed?'

'Vanished without a trace.'

'Well,' Joshua replied, 'We can't compete with that.' A pause, then: 'You sound sad.'

'I was just thinking about Kallyn. She couldn't enjoy the university much. Came from a low gravity world, thin skeletal structure, spent most of her time in a grav-chair.'

Joshua continued his examination in silence. Bernice guessed the lack of prompting meant he was satisfied there wasn't any residual concussion from the -

'What happened?' Bernice asked.

The instrument cut off, the pressure of his hands vanished. 'We were hoping you could tell us.'

'I was in a ship,' she answered. 'Some kind of accident. I don't remember.'

'We found you in open space,' he prompted.

'Open..?'

'Your suit was cracked, venting oxygen. Probably didn't have much more than a minute or two left when we got to you.' There was a tap; metal on metal. 'There's a table to your right,' Joshua told her. 'I've left a voice recorder there. I've found in situations like this, talking helps stir memories. The recorder is to make sure you don't forget anything you want to remember.'

Bernice nodded. He didn't say any more. The room was almost silent. Not even the brush of clothing or the squeak of his shoes. He was, Bernice thought, just sitting there, waiting. Because he didn't want to tell her.

'Why can't I see?' she asked.

A deep breath in, then: 'Whatever happened, there were obviously some odd forces involved.'

'That's not an answer,' Bernice said. 'What does that mean?'

`It means your eyes, the eyes themselves, have been damaged, scarred somehow. And if you can't see, they're probably damaged beyond repair.' A pause, a rustle of fabric. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

Bernice didn't say anything. She just sat there, looking at the darkness. Slowly, her fingers sank into the sheet, digging in, and then, finally, unclenching. Joshua was still waiting, so she turned her head to where she thought he was. 'There's more, isn't there?'

It was, Bernice thought, a measure of how much people relied on their sight that it had taken her so long to realise about her legs. Without a visual context to judge her movement again, she'd been lost in darkness. And while it had come as a relief when she'd *regained feeling in her hands* and arms and torso, it had taken time to realise there was still no sensation in her legs.

To start with, she'd assumed it was an effect of the medication. Some opiate that was slow to wear off. It was why she hadn't been able to *hear details* at first, why she'd slowly *regained control* of her own voice as the effect began to wear off, and then feeling in her arms and hands. But as she'd sat there, talking to Joshua, she'd kept prodding and pinching her thigh. And as the minutes passed, nothing had changed.

According to Joshua, there was every chance her spinal injuries could be repaired what they made land. That was actually the term he'd used, not "docked" or "planetfall", but "made land". Like "rescue ship" it felt like a reference from another time. She'd laughed, well aware of how hysterical it must have made her look. He'd asked what was wrong, and she'd just waved him on. And so, he'd explained that the damaged spinal tissue could be bypassed by a specialised surgeon, and while her own eyes were unsalvageable, there was still a chance an artificial set might take.

`I could have green eyes,' Bernice had said. 'Never had green eyes before. Not that I can remember.'

The conversation had tailed off after that. Joshua had guided her hand towards the recorder, shown her how it worked. As practice, he'd got her to start talking about events from before the accident, so she'd told him about the Collection and her life there. After five minutes the usual introductory gambits had played out and Bernice had run out of things to say. When Joshua said she looked tired, Bernice hadn't been able to disagree.

He'd taken the recorder away then, put something else in her hands. 'Headphones?' she'd asked; 'Delta wave augmentation,' he'd replied. And then he'd left.

Bernice sat there, trying to remember what had happened. There were odd sensations in her mind — half-formed images, crazy, chaotic — but nothing she could piece together. Every time she tried, the memory seemed to slip away. It was probably best, she decided, to let her subconscious do the work.

She picked up the recorder and — after a little experimentation — found the playback button. It was nice to have a voice in the room with her, even if it was only her own. Something to fill the silence and occupy her mind. She played it back twice before lifting the headphones on.

For the first few seconds the white noise was undercut by a loose connection, amplifying her own breathing back at her. Bernice tapped them a couple of times and the sound disappeared. Moments later, she was asleep once more and let the memories run.

The world was exploding around her. A world in which she could see.

It started with a crack. A hairline drawn across the crystal of a computer screen, the noise etching itself against the background hum of engines and technology. She blinked and the crack vanished, her vision blurred. Blinked again, and the split was back, deeper. And she knew immediately what it meant. She was going to die.

There was a hiss and the screen went black. The fracture now a silvery negative against it. And with that change came the sound. A high pitched, undulating noise that made her eyes ache.

Bernice reached for the straps, fastening herself tight into her seat as the air around her flared with colour. She began punching buttons on the console, but the command pathways were dead; had probably died before the crack began to show. The bulkheads either side of her were starting to buckle. No, not buckle, but shift, reality creeping across their surfaces. The cabin might only have been the size of a single bunk, but it sat at the heart of a ship that extended another thirty metres in every direction. And if she was feeling the effects here, then the rest of the sphere was already shot to hell. And that meant the mission was already over.

The emergency return, they'd told her, had multi-phasic shielding. Ninety-seven per cent of its function was that shielding, to protect a hard line to the other three per cent: emergency thrusters that could only deliver one course. Up and out.

The emergency return switch was, of course, a big, red button located behind a yellow and black striped cover. For once, Bernice opted not to grouse about resorting to cliché. Her hand bleeding colour and hard reality, she reached for the control.

'We need to change course,' Bernice said. 'We need to get back to the Deep.'

'The what?'

'Where you picked me up.'

'We picked you up on the edge of the System Colonies,' Joshua replied. 'The tail end of ninety kilometres of wreckage. I've never heard of any, what did you call it?'

'The Deep.' Bernice pinched her nose. 'You might have a different name for it, I suppose. It's a region of space close to the Mimsphere, riddled

with gravitic storms. Everyone avoids it because no-one comes out again.' The recorder was still in her hand and she thrust it out towards his voice: 'Here. I recorded everything I could remember. It should give you enough to work with.'

'I still don't —'

'I was on a rescue mission,' Bernice snapped. 'The details are still a bit hazy, but... There was a ship. A ship that was lost in the Deep. I was sent in after the ship, but something must have happened.' She paused. 'I should have just said "no". Whenever Brax turns up with a job that needs doing, I should say "no".'

He laughed. 'You'd never get the words out,' he said. Bernice could imagine the smile; warm, full of admiration. 'We patched your i.d. into the grid.' A pause, then: 'You like the hot zones, don't you?'

'It's just the way my life's worked out,' Bernice replied. 'I'm not... I don't go hunting for this kind of thing.'

'I believe you,' he said.

'Please,' Bernice said, 'listen to me. I can't remember any detail about the ship yet, but you're supposed to be a rescue ship and there's a ship that needs rescuing.'

'I tell you what: I'll take it to the captain —'

'This would never have happened on the Wargamer.'

'I'll take it to the captain and we'll listen to this tape of yours, and in return...' There were footsteps, then the click of machinery. 'There's something you can hear.'

There was a static hiss, then a burst of distorted sound which settled down to a child's laughter and then, finally, a voice.

'Peter,' Bernice smiled.

They left her alone as the message played.

It was, Bernice thought, almost like when she'd first woken up. She barely heard the words, just focussed on the sound of his voice, remembering the awkward toddler stresses he placed on words, the giggles and dropped consonants. And with each of those sounds, his love shone.

Bernice had worried about that a lot. She'd told Joshua she didn't go looking for trouble, and it was true. But too often her life meant she could be away for weeks at a time. Would Peter remember her? Would he still love her when she came home?

It hadn't been so bad when he'd been younger; leaving a baby behind, the stress was only ever your own. When they grew older, when they knew and wanted you, you could see it in their eyes. When Peter said goodbye now there was a sadness he tried to hide. Bernice wondered how much he knew, how much he remembered of things like the Axis.

Enough to know that every time his mother walked out of the door there was a chance she'd never come back to him?

When the message clicked off, she was crying again. 'I'm coming back,'

Benny whispered. 'Peter, I'm coming back.'

When she dreamt this time, it was pure memory. They were in the space-dock and Braxiatel was explaining about the ship. There was someone else sitting behind him, still in shadow. The ship was visible through the glass beneath them; a sphere. 'A perfect sphere,' Braxiatel said. 'No bumps or irregularities of any kind. I've been working on it for a while, and this seemed like a good excuse for a test flight.' The hatch, he explained, would be molecularly bonded with the hull after Bernice boarded. A bond which could only be broken from inside the capsule. 'From the outside,' he said, 'it will be perfection.'

'Why a sphere?'

He smiled, 'Because it's the purest three-dimensional shape. That purity is important. It's your lifeline; no edges for anything to take hold of.'

'What kind of anything?'

'I have a theory,' he murmured. 'About the type of forces which govern the Deep.'

'Nothing you'd care to share?'

'Perception is vital.' He paused, gave her a reassuring smile. 'Don't even think about it.'

At first she thought she was still wearing the delta wave augmenters, that the noise was the same feedback. She went to tap the headphones only to find they weren't there.

The past couple of days she'd come to know her surroundings a bit better, could find the glass of water or contact the bridge for herself. Joshua was the only one who ever came in, but she'd had a couple of conversations with other crew members over the intercom. Trying to get answers about the ship she'd been sent in to rescue, but no-one wanted to talk about it. Bernice ran her hand along the back wall, then pulled the headphones from their clip. She brought them up to her ear, but there was no sound.

The noise she'd heard must have come from somewhere further into the ship; the ticking of the coolant pipes or maintenance in the air ducts. She imagined Joshua — an anonymous shape — stuck in a maintenance conduit like a cartoon penguin in a bottle. The thought alone was enough to make her laugh.

The sound echoed flatly in the room.

And that was when she heard it again. Not from the headphones, not from somewhere else in the ship, but there, in the room. Breathing, pacing, scratching.

'Hello?' she said, pushing herself up on the bed. 'Joshua?'

The room was silent.

Was this what the rest of her life was going to be like? Wondering at every sound? Adrift? No, she thought, not adrift. Adrift was when you were

lost on an ocean, dwarfed by the world, and this wasn't like that. Because the world around her was a dark box where she could be sure of nothing beyond her fingertips.

She listened, but there was no sound.

She thought of Peter. Remembering his eyes and his mouth, the shape of his toddler's nose and his fuzz of Killoran hair. Because if she could remember him, imagine him, if she could somehow see him next to her, then everything was right with the world.

`It was a dog,' Bernice insisted.

`I told you,' Joshua replied, 'we don't have a dog. Don't have a cat or any kind of animal.'

`It was here,' she said. 'It was in this room, I heard it.'

`And I'm telling you there's nothing on board like that.'

`How can you be sure?'

`The only thing that's been brought onto this ship in the past week is you.'

`It was there.' Bernice paused, trying to remember the details of the sound. 'In the corner.' She stuck her arm out to the left. 'Over there. There was breathing, deep and ragged. And I could hear the claws. It was scratching the floor or the walls or something.' There was no reply. 'Could you at least look?' she snapped.

`I am looking.'

Bernice jumped a little. The voice wasn't where she was expecting it. 'You moved,' she said. 'I didn't hear you move. Sorry, concentrating too much on the dog, and I didn't...' Her voice trailed off and she forced a faint smile. 'Sorry, you just startled me.'

`No scratch marks,' Joshua said. 'Nothing at all.' The voice came closer and again she flinched as his fingers touched her face; not as much as the first time he'd done it. She was getting used to the smooth pressure of his hands, but it still came as a shock when the touch came out of nowhere.

The fingers ran over her skull, then there was a hum of instrumentation. Bernice gasped, a burning in her temples. 'What are you doing?'

`Just checking your hearing. There may be some damage I didn't spot earlier.'

The sensation got worse. Fire in her head. Bernice screwed her eyes tight. 'Can you stop? Because I don't think I'm the problem.'

`Then what is?'

`You said I'm the only thing to have come on-board this ship, yes?' She winced. He was still running the instrument over her head. A deep breath and she focused on getting the words out. 'Then it must have come with me.'

`You're not making sense.'

"No edges for anything to take hold of". That's what Brax said about the ship.'

The instrument switched off and the pain subsided. Enough of a respite that Benny could almost hear the sigh as Joshua said: 'So?'

'We've been working on the assumption that there was a malfunction. The sphere fell through a wormhole in the Deep.'

'Breaking up and depositing you half a galaxy away, yes.'

'What if that's only half right? What if it wasn't broken up by the wormhole? What if something got hold of it? Something that lives in the Deep.'

There was another sigh, and then the instrument buzzed back into life. Bernice gasped. 'You're hurting me,' she said, but there was no answer. The fire in her head flared. 'You're hurting me!'

She flung out an arm, trying to bat Joshua away, to stop the pain. The arm connected with nothing and she over-balanced, could feel her body pass the tipping point, and begin to tumble from the bed. Her other hand tried to grab something for support, but only ended up pulling the sheet after her. She fell, but the floor never came and there was only darkness.

Joshua told her it was just vertigo. 'Benign positional vertigo, to be precise. Crystals get dislodged in the fluid in the inner ear, start brushing up against the hairs which control your balance. And when they do that, you don't know which way is up or down.'

Bernice nodded. Her hands were clutching the edge of the mattress. She hadn't seen a horizon for the best part of three days, but that wasn't helping. Because her body, her mind, the senses she still had all still told her it was shifting.

'He paused. 'It's bad enough when you can see. I can't imagine what it must be like when you can't.'

'You're falling,' Bernice whispered. 'Falling forever.'

There was a pause. Then an embarrassed cough. 'I'm sorry about the discomfort. I left the automatic treatment option on last time I used the scanner.'

The pain was from microwave transmissions to destroy the crystals and return her sense of balance. Joshua warned her there would still be some residual discomfort, then made his apologies. There was a pressing matter on the bridge — a problem with the ship's Mukabi processor — and he had to go.

Bernice said nothing as he went. Just concentrated on the fabric beneath her fingers. Something to provide her with some sort of horizon. A solidity she could hold onto, a reference point she could build out from. She sat there for a few moments, thinking about what Joshua had just said. There was something not right about all of this, but the detail kept slipping away from her.

The recorder is there to make sure you don't forget anything you want to remember.

Bernice reached for the device. She hesitated, idly pulling at her legs with

her other hand, then took a deep breath and switched the recorder on.

'I saw a dog kill once,' she said. 'I wasn't much older than Peter at the time. We were in a market on Deldaresh, and it was hot, and this man... Well, he was drunk, and the dog was tied up outside the bar. I don't even know if it was his dog or not. But he came out and began to taunt it, dancing just outside of its reach, poking it with a stick. My mother was just about to go over and tell him to stop, but then it slipped its leash.' She paused. 'He only got to scream once before it was into his throat.'

She switched the recorder off for a moment, listening. Bernice concentrated, making sure to take note of everything she could hear. And then she hit record again. 'I didn't see much,' Bernice explained. 'My mother put her hand over my eyes, wrapped herself around me. I couldn't see it, but I could hear it. And the thing I remember the most is the way it was breathing. Hot and heavy.' She swallowed. 'I had nightmares about that for years. Just the sound of its breathing. This sloppy, wet breathing. And another sound, somewhere in there. A rattle. Do dogs get asthma? I don't know. But when I'd have the nightmare, that's the sound that would linger.'

She took another breath, rearranging herself on the bed, then continued: 'The thing is, I know now — knew then — it wasn't the dog's fault. It shouldn't have been tied up like that, the man shouldn't have been taunting it. Because we're all animals, all just one bad day away from snapping.' Pause. 'Joshua says there's no dog on this ship, but I'm not so sure. Because I don't think it's anything you can see, I think it's from the Deep, and I think it's in my mind.'

In the corner of the room, something was breathing.

Circadian rhythms took you so far, but when you were blind it was hard keeping track of time. Bernice had got into the habit of asking the ship's computer every few hours, just to try to establish some routine. She tried to keep awake during the day, make sure she was asleep at the same time as the crew, to feel in touch with the ship and its personnel. To try to forget that she might never see the dawn again.

Tonight it wasn't working. Because normally the ship was silent; just the hum of engines and electrics and the hiss of pneumatics. It wasn't working because the creature was still there. She could hear it in the corner. The wheezing damp of its lungs. And the more she listened, the more detailed the sound got. Itching claws, the scratch of its coat — probably short, thick hair — against the decking and the walls.

Bernice was trying not to think about it too much. She had an idea, but wanted it confirmed before she did anything. She didn't want to think about it, didn't want to force the issue. Because, at heart, she didn't want to know if she right. Because she didn't want to think about what it meant if she was wrong.

So she thought about Peter.

A few months ago, she'd become aware that Peter was starting to dream. Not the gentle hand movement of a baby's sleep, but more an autonomic reaction against something only he could see. The dreams had slowly turned to nightmares. Bernice had wondered what he was remembering, what he was dreaming of: Mushtaq Anson? The glass prison where he was born?

One night, when he was crying, she'd slipped into his room. The window was blacked out and she'd closed the door behind her. Then she'd repeated her usual mantra: 'You know me, you know the sound of my voice. If you can hear me, then you know everything is going to be okay.' Only Peter hadn't calmed down, he'd become more agitated. Not because he couldn't hear her, but because he couldn't see. She was just a featureless voice.

Bernice knew if she could see Peter then everything was right with the world. It was only in that moment that she realised he felt the same way about her. So Bernice had pulled the door open and switched on the hallway light. A thin bright line cutting the dark.

And Peter had seen her and smiled.

Bernice thought about the smile, trying to see it. Fidgeting on the bed and adjusting the covers, keeping that image of Peter in her head as the dog shifted, back and forth, in the corner.

'I don't believe in you,' Bernice said. 'I don't believe you're there.'

There was silence for a few seconds. Then the dog growled.

'I don't believe you,' she repeated.

The growl came again. The creature was shifting, moving quicker. Then the growl got louder — guttural, feral — and the claws dug in against the decking. The sound of a creature about to turn, about to break. There was a moment of silence as Bernice braced herself, then its weight smacked her back into the pillow.

'I don't believe you,' she repeated. But despite the words, she still put her arm up. Claws rasped on her skin, and she pushed back against the force of the animal. The growl sounded again, closer, ducking in toward her ear. She pushed with her other arm, screamed as teeth sunk into her.

'I don't believe you!' Bernice shouted. And then the dog was gone.

Bernice lay there for a minute, panting. Her fingers slipped along the skin of her arm, feeling where it had scratched, where its teeth had broken the surface. Blood, but nothing too deep. She rearranged herself in the bed, then tore a section of the sheet off to bandage her arm. Then she sat and waited.

There was a chime from the computer. Six o'clock. Which meant Joshua would be doing his rounds shortly; calling on her was the first task of the day after setting up the breakfast coffee.

A few minutes later the door hissed open and his footsteps appeared in the room.

`Hello,' he said. There was a pause, then a quiet, panicked: 'What happened to your arm?'

The bandage was gently pulled away.

`It was the dog,' Bernice said.

`Really?' Joshua said. 'Then why are your fingernails caked with blood?'

`It was the dog.' Bernice nodded to the corner.

`No dog,' Joshua replied.

And Bernice listened, and he was right. The sound had gone. She just smiled thinly as Joshua began to dress her wounds. There was an antiseptic spray, then the pressure of wipe. Bernice listened and felt it all, trying to make up her mind. In the end, she realised, she didn't have a choice.

She just had to think of Peter's face, that shaft of light cutting across it.

`The thing I still can't understand,' Bernice said, 'is why me?'

`Accident victims often feel like that,' Joshua replied.

No,' Bernice answered. 'I mean, really: why me? I'm an archaeologist. Why send me after a lost ship?'

`We'll ask your friend when we get you home.'

`Brax told me not to think about it,' Bernice said.

`Think about what?' Joshua asked.

`The Deep,' Bernice replied. 'Well, the sphere and the descent.' She paused, wiggling her shoulders. 'I thought he was being reassuring, that there was nothing for me to worry about. But Brax isn't like that, not really. He can be quite alarmingly literal. He meant for me not to think about it.'

Joshua began to slip a compression dressing over her arm, gauze tightening around her skin. His voice was becoming more strident. 'I think we're going to have to get you a psych evaluation when we make land.'

`The Deep,' Bernice said, 'isn't gravitic space, it's some kind of conceptual space.'

Joshua laughed. 'Sorry,' he said, 'you make it sound like an art gallery.'

`Maybe it is. One of those big white open spaces.'

`I never got the idea of those,' Joshua said.

`You give the art its own meaning,' Bernice replied. 'It's your perception that gives it meaning. I think the Deep operates in the same way. The sphere was a pure shape, easy to keep in your head, to imagine.'

`To perceive?'

`Exactly. And that perception governs your environment.'

`And you think that's why you crashed.'

No,' Bernice said as he stepped back. 'I think that's why the *Wargamer* never escaped the Deep. The AI made a navigational error, they drifted in and the crew never came to terms with the environment.' She reached across towards the pitcher of water. 'What do you think?'

`It's an interesting possibility, I'll give you that,' Joshua said, 'but somewhat beyond my field of expertise.'

`Well, it would be,' Bernice said, taking hold of the table by the pitcher.

'What with you not being any more real than that dog,' She pulled hard, dragging her body out of the bed. There was a brief moment of falling - real falling into darkness — and then she hit the floor.

'Bernice...?' Joshua managed. 'Are you okay?'

'Give me a hand up, will you?' Bernice asked.

There was a pause. 'L. I think I'd better go and fetch some help,' Joshua replied.

As she heard the footsteps and the door opening and closing, Bernice turned her head up and bellowed: 'If you're wondering what gave you away, it was the fingertips.'

There was no answer.

She sighed, and dropped back down to the floor. It took a few moments to rearrange herself— she'd twisted as she fell and there was still no feeling in her legs — then she began to pull herself forwards.

The fingertips had been the first thing. That initial shock she'd felt hadn't just been surprise at the unseen touch but at its feel as well. The movements had felt right but there'd been no texture. When he'd leaned close, she'd never caught his scent — not even breakfast coffee — or felt his breath or the heat of his body. When it had attacked, the dog had been exactly the same. Snarling, biting, but no breath, no heat. The wounds all too clean and regular to be genuine teeth.

'But then,' she whispered, 'a forcefield wouldn't have any of those things, would they?' She looked up again. 'Can you hear me, you decrepit old wreck?'

Because the simple truth was, you didn't send an archaeologist on a rescue mission. You sent them out to bring back history. And that's what this ship was. 'You're the *Wargamer*, aren't you?'

'You need to stop,' Joshua's voice, coming through the intercom now. 'You're blind, Bernice.'

'No,' she answered. And as she did, she felt more certain. 'I don't think I am. It was my first instinct, every time I woke up.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Turn the light on. Because I think that's all you've done. You just turned out the lights. Every single one. Which means all I need to do to beat you, is find a light you couldn't switch off without doing real damage. Like a holographic data store.'

'You're going to hurt yourself.'

'I don't think so,' she answered. She was at the wall now, began pulling herself along to the left, towards where the door should be.

The thesis on the *Wargamer* had been a first-class piece of work. It had gotten her into this mess, after all. In addition to all the background material, Kallyn had created a holographic replica of the ship; played her own wargames with it to illustrate points of operational principle. The ship had been state-of-the-art, but not without flaws. One of which was the AI's perception filter; it had difficulties with casual or obscure human

behaviour, tending not to see minor ticks or taking time to adjust to sudden shifts in reasoning.

So the past day, Bernice had been slowly pulling her unfeeling legs across to the edge of the bed, one or two millimetres at a time. The edge of the bed and the limit of the forcefield surgeon above it. The gamble was judging what point was far enough that she could pull free, but not so far that it would trigger the AI's awareness.

'Mukabi processors haven't been used in AI systems for almost three hundred years,' Bernice said. 'Protocols usually kept them in check, but they still had a tendency to tip the artificial personalities towards sadism. I'm guessing your protocols have got corrupted over the past three hundred years.'

'I don't understand what you're —'

'I'm still in the Deep,' Bernice snapped. 'I've never left.' The figure behind Braxiatel had come to her last night. Kallyn. Kallyn who'd finally located her life's obsession. Kallyn who'd never survive the journey into gravitic space and had come for someone who might. 'I'm trapped on a ship with an AI that's gone mad from spending three hundred years on its own.' She paused, 'The AI? That's you, in case you were wondering. If you weren't there'd be a big gang of orderlies, dragging me back to my bed by now.'

When she hadn't been pulling herself free, she'd been trying to recall every detail she could about the Wargamer. It wasn't that big a ship, which was advantageous. Because it meant there was an access hatch for the main computer core on every deck. If she could reach that, she could disable the AI's main personality but leave the ship's main systems running. Piloting it out the Deep was still going to be an issue, but that could wait till later. Her legs remained numb, but Bernice was guessing that was the work of an anaesthetic which would wear off in an hour or so. Until then, she could crawl. The big problem right now was that she still couldn't see, which meant relying on touch and memory.

It was the dog that had made her believe. She was fairly sure that when it had started, it had just been her imagination, playing off the ambient noise of the ship. But when she'd expressed that fear out loud, the noise had changed. The speaker in the room that had been projecting Joshua's voice had started matching her description.

She'd pulled over an IV stand, managed to hit the door release on her second attempt.

'Bernice, you need to stop.' Was there something different about the voice? A pixelisation of the tone as the stress began to show?

Bernice ignored it, pulled herself onwards.

The air in the corridor was cold, much colder than it had been in the medical bay. There was also a taste to it; the scent of a tomb, ancient and untouched. All of which was grist to her mill; affirming her belief she was trapped with a crazy AI playing at being its dead crew and playing with

her. For amusement? To better understand human nature? To learn why its crew hadn't been able to cope with -

'They couldn't cope with the Deep,' Bernice breathed. 'So why can I?'

Perception governs the environment. That, she realised in one horrible moment, was the other possibility. That she was still reaching for the switch, that all this was the shift of reality about her. She'd come looking for Wargamer, so it made sense that was the reality she'd create. But what did it say about her if her perceived environment was darkness, pain, isolated voices and insanity?

The floor seemed to drop away beneath her, and she found herself on her back, clawing at deck plates. The vertigo taking hold once more. She breathed deep, fought the sensation, the waves of nausea. More tears. 'I don't go looking for trouble, Peter,' she promised. 'I don't.'

'What are you talking about, Bernice?' Joshua's voice.

'I wasn't,' Benny said. She pushed back onto her front. Her invisible horizon kept swaying, but she could keep steady enough now to keep moving. Her arms were burning up with effort now, her fingers slippery with sweat, having to feel for any kind of ridge in the decking, dig her fingers in and pull.

'You were muttering about perfection. Or perception, one of the two.' Halfway through, just for a moment, his voice broke into an artificial monotone.

Bernice slipped on the decking, head crashing down hard. She gasped. There was a cut on her temple, blood on her face. The world kept swaying around her. 'I need to find a way out,' she whispered.

'Have we moved on?' Joshua again. 'Are you on a spaceship or just inside your own head?'

'Neither, both,' Bernice said. She'd reached a junction, could feel open space to her left. The corridor with the level's data store.

'Which is more likely, Bernice: you're trapped with a mad computer in some nightmare of your own making? Or this is just post-traumatic stress?' A pause. 'Let me help you. Please.'

The damn thing sounded so genuine with that last "please". Please. Just like Peter. Bernice shook her head. It didn't matter, couldn't matter. Her legs still weren't moving, and she couldn't keep the layout straight in her head. She was so tired. Please. She couldn't do this.

She reached out for the wall, for support, and that's when she felt it. The hatch.

'Bernice, you can't see. You have no idea what's behind there.'

'Data store,' she said. 'Light.'

'Fusion vent. Death,' Joshua answered.

'No,' Bernice muttered, shaking her head. She began scrabbling around, searching for the catches.

'You can't see to know that.'

'It's symbolic,' Bernice said. 'Sight is the first thing governing

our perception of the world. Regain my sight and I see what's really happening.'

`You need to stop this. Right now.'

`I'm not mad,' Bernice whispered. 'I'm not.'

She thought of Peter, released the final catch on the access panel.

`Bernice, don't.'

Peter. His face caught in the glow from the hallway. Because if she could see him, then everything was right with the world. 'I'm coming home, sweetheart. I promise, I'm coming home.'

Bernice pulled at the hatch.

`Let there be light,' she said.



Dawn was rising outside as Bernice finished her story. She had moved the converted foam machine almost outside, into the church's porch area. They were undercover and safe from the relentless rain, but hopefully far enough away from anything flammable in the church interior. Deputisation or no deputisation, Bernice didn't want to jeopardise her original job by burning the place to the ground.

She had removed the black stones from the circuitry that embedded them in the skulls. They were so small, a few chips of material in her palm. But she could still feel their presence in her mind and, when they wished to be heard, their collective voice. She had a sudden pang, that if this worked — or went badly wrong — she would miss them.

It had been a very long night.

'So, this is my theory. The stone, the glass, the whatever-it-is-you-are, was obviously found on numerous worlds in small quantities — you're rare, but strangely prolific. My guess, and this is just a guess, is that the black stone fell like meteorites, and was treated as such on every planet it was found. Just another piece of space rock, but with interesting properties.

'My guess though, is that you're more than that, that you're only rocks when you fall to Earth — that you're a species that can enter different states in its life cycle. As water freezes into ice, and boils into vapour, so you can be released from your solid, crystalline state. These cycles occur in space, of course. Take you out of that, drop you into an atmosphere, and, well, you're stuck. Just a rock.

'Hopefully, by creating a vacuum we'll kick start your life cycle again. You will go back to your collective state, reborn. All wounds will be healed, the bits and pieces of these human minds you've collected swept away. I doubt you'll even remember the conversations we've had here.'

Bernice placed the black crystals in the now empty chamber of the foam machine. She closed the loading hatch, and twisted the clasp shut. All it would take was one button press, and the air would be sucked out of the chamber. After that — well, she wasn't sure about after.

This was all guesswork.

But it could work, and if it did, this was her last chance.

'What happened,' asked Bernice.

+Happened?+ asked the skulls, or rather the crystals. The old bones themselves were back in the crypt.

`Here,' asked Bernice. 'What happened here, with the men whose minds you were grafted to.'

+...+

`You can't remember.' It was disappointing, but not unexpected. She wasn't talking to the men who had been killed here, but to a separate life form that had once been connected to those men, long ago.

+We remember. It is confused, but we remember.+

Bernice didn't speak. She didn't want to break the chain of thought.

+We, the men we were attached to, we came here to cause chaos. We had limited numbers, our war was going badly. We dug this room beneath the old church, and hid here during the day. At night we would go down into the town, under cover of dark, to kill, and steal, and destroy. We planted bombs, killed any witnesses, and stole whatever we could to help out cause. It was pointless. We were already defeated.+

+Luck could only last so long. While we slept for the day, the men from the town must have begun a search of the woods. They found us barely conscious, passed out drunk from stolen wine.+

+It was quick. There were shouts, and lights, and we were dragged to our feet, then forced back to our knees. Then it was the end.+

Bernice wasn't quite sure what to say.

`Hardly a fair and due process.'

It was just a voice in her mind, but she could almost feel it shrug, as if to say 'what was, back then?'

`Thank you for telling me,' she said.

+We will be glad to forget all of this.+

`And so you shall,' said Bernice, and pushed the button.

The machine made a swishing hum as it drained the air from the chamber, and then began to shake. It was being used for a purpose for which it hadn't been designed. Then with a slight thud, it fell over to one side and went silent, smoke rising from its burnt out motor. There was an acrid smell in the air.

Bernice was about to go and find her insulated gloves, and have a

prod to check whether the machine was safe or not, when the loading hatch popped off the side and flipped across the room. A white hot glow emerged from within, and something quite small and very mobile floated out from within the burnt out metal.

It was an undulating pure black mass, haloed with white light. Its dark core was neither liquid nor solid, but something else, something transient.

The creature floated hesitantly about the room, exploring. It bobbed in front of Bernice.

'Well, that worked,' she said under her breath, hoping not to startle it. Although she wasn't even sure that 'it' had any concept of sound. It was quite a beautiful thing, pure light and shade. Its movements were uncertain, almost stumbling. It seemed to be watching her, cautiously.

Bernice wasn't sure how long this newborn thing could survive within an atmosphere, how long it might have before it reverted to a solid mass. It needed to get going. She reached out, encouraging it to make contact. Bernice closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and tried to think of the emptiness of space, to visualise the void way above her head.

She felt a spark of recognition at the edge of her mind.

'Yes, that's it,' she said. 'That's where you want to be.'

She opened her eyes. The creature was floating above her hand. It was almost resting on it, except that it had no weight, just a sense of something moving near her skin. Then, with a slight hum, it lifted away, and streaked off into the sky, moving faster until it disappeared altogether.

Bernice hoped it found this life more fun than its last one.

It was dawn as Bernice walked down from the church, back into the village. She barely noticed the rain, she was too tired. When she reached the inn she went straight to her room, stripped off the wet outer layers of her clothing, rolled into bed and was almost instantly asleep.

Minutes after she slipped into unconsciousness, the rains stopped. The sky was clear, and the sun shone through the window, but it didn't wake Bernice. A beautiful day came and went.

In the middle of the evening she was woken by an impatient knocking at the door of her room. Bernice snapped awake, slightly disoriented. She pulled on a robe and opened the door. Inspector Jasmyn of the Jovellian Police Force was standing in the doorway, large as life and slightly taller than Bernice had expected. He had the dishevelled expression of someone who had spent most of the day travelling.

`Professor Summerfield,' he said, obviously eager to get an update on the case. 'Tell me a story.'

Bernice opened her mouth to respond, but found she had no answer to give.



About the Authors

Mark Clapham has a long history writing about Bernice Summerfield, from the 1998 novel *Beige Planet Mars* to 2009'S audioplay *Venus Mantrap*, both co-written with Lance Parkin. He has also written for BBC Books' Doctor Who novels and Accent UK's comic anthologies *Zombies and Robots*, as well as various magazines and websites he's doubtless forgotten about. He is one of the founders of the Shiny Shelf review site (www.shinyshelf.com) and lives in Exeter. Mark would like to thank the authors, Eddie, Adrian and Xanna for all their work on the book; Stuart Douglas for top talent tips; Richard for letting him cannibalise bits from his story for the framing sequence; and Mags L Halliday for general support and leniency.

Lance Parkin is the author of Benny tales *Just War*, *The Dying Days*, *The Extinction Event*, *The Big Hunt* and *Benny's Tale in The Company of Friends*. He co-wrote *Beige Planet Mars* and *Venus Mantrap* with Mark Clapham. Lance also wrote *The Emmerdale Story* which features photography by Lisa Bowerman, who plays Benny in a series of audio adventures also from Big Finish, and *Ahistory*, a fictional timeline which includes many adventures featuring Bernice Summerfield.

Paul Farnsworth decided he wanted to be a professional writer when he was 11 and gave up when he was 37. Since then he's been much happier. During his wilderness years he contributed a story to *More Short Trips*, ruined a couple of perfectly good magazines and attained something approaching recognition with *The University of the Bleeding Obvious*. He is reasonably optimistic that it will all end in tears.

Jim Smith is the author of the Bernice Summerfield play *The Adventure of the Diogenes Damsel* and a startling number of books about film directors, some of which are even still in print. He lives in London, in the shadow of the Post Office Tower, and drinks coffee. Lots of coffee.

Eddie Robson is a scriptwriter, prose writer and journalist. His credits for BBC Radio include material for *That Mitchell and Webb Sound*, *Recorded for Training Purposes* and *Look Away Now*. He is the author of ten Doctor Who audio plays for Big Finish, including *Human Resources*, *Memory Lane*, *Grand Theft Cosmos* and *The Raincloud Man*, and four plays in the Bernice Summerfield series. His books include critical guides to film noir and the work of the Coen brothers, and an illustrated adaptation of *Dracula* for young readers. He lives in Lancaster. He would like to thank Lindsey Moore.

Cody Schell works as a graphic artist in Iowa. He's constantly interrupted by aliens from the future looking for a baby named Jimmy. His professional writing debut was in *Iris Wildthyme* and the *Celestial Omnibus*. He'd like to give a very special "gracias" to Stuart Douglas and Paul Magrs of Obverse Books.

Mark Michalowski is the author of four Doctor Who novels, a Bernice Summerfield novel and an assortment of short stories.

Jonathan Dennis lives in California. He has contributed to *Faction Paradox*: *The Book of the War*, *Iris Wildthyme* and the *Celestial Omnibus*, *Walking in Eternity*, and written for radio. He would like to thank his wife, Wendy Muir, for her support, assistance and pie.

Richard Freeman is a full time cryptozoologist and Zoological Director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology. He has hunted relic hominids in Russia, unknown apes in Sumatra, giant anacondas in Guyana, deathworms in Mongolia and dragons in West Africa and Indo-China. He would like to dedicate his story to Patricia Wrightson, whose book *The Nargun and the Stars* creeped him out on Jackanory circa 1976.

Nick Wallace thanks you for your custom, but says anything you need to know about him can probably be found on Wikipedia.